DEATH MARCH
1
TO THE
PARALLEL WORLD
RHAPSODY
HIRO AINANA
ILLUSTRATION BY SHRI

DEATH MARCH
TO THE
PARALLEL WORLD
RHAPSODY

SATOU
A programmer who is around thirty years old. He took a nap in the middle of a "death march" at work, but when he woke up, he found himself in a different universe...
TAMA
A cat-eared girl. She is lost in the labyrinth when Satou finds her.
LIZA
A scalefolk girl. She is lost in the labyrinth when Satou finds her.
POCHI
A dog-eared girl. She is lost in the labyrinth when Satou finds her.
ZENA MARIENTEIL
Seventeen years old. She is a magic soldier in the army of the Seiryuu County and the daughter of a knight.

"Um…are you sure it's okay for me to take it?"
"Of course. It would trouble me if you didn't."

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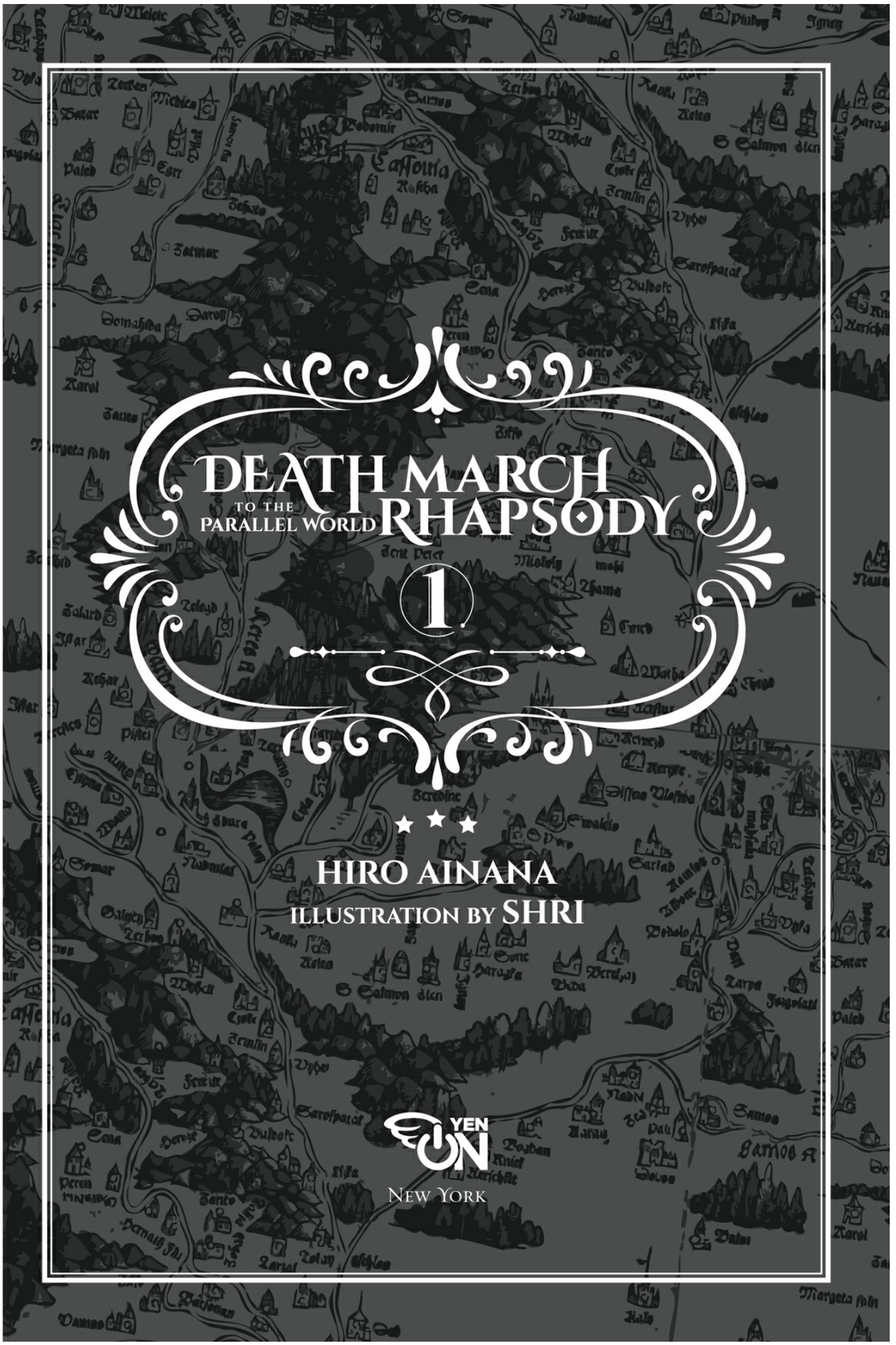

DEATH MARCH TO THE PARALLEL WORLD RHAPSODY

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HIRO AINANA

ILLUSTRATION BY SHRI

YEN ON

NEW YORK

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Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody, Vol. 1

Hiro Ainana

Translation by Jenny McKeon

Cover art by shri

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PROLOGUE
Death March to Disaster

Stars streak across the sky.

Dozens and dozens of them.

Have you ever seen a shooting star?

I'm sure many people have. Maybe you've been captivated by their fleeting beauty or made a wish on one as it fell through the night sky.

But have you ever watched a meteorite rip through the heavens toward the surface? Have you seen it tear the sky to pieces with a thunderous roar, crashing into the ground with a terrifying impact?

Maybe some of you have seen something like it on TV or on the Internet somewhere. But even then, I'm sure nobody ever thought they wanted to see a meteor shower up close, hurtling down all around them.

And yet, at this very moment, I'm watching more than a hundred falling rocks pour down right before my eyes, one after the other.

No—I shouldn't say it so passively, as if it's someone else's problem. Because I'm the one responsible for this disaster in the first place.

Because of a choice I thoughtlessly made just ten minutes ago, a meteor shower is gouging out the ground. The meteorites make landfall everywhere, from a few hundred feet away from me to the enormous canyon in the distance, crushing all the enemies within that large radius.

The dots on the radar in the corner of my field of vision disappear like a bothersome stain being washed away. I can't see it from here, but most likely, countless lives are being snuffed out at each meteorite's point of impact.

And shortly after each one disappears into the earth, I hear the sound of the impact and feel a tremor under my feet. And then, just as a massive tidal wave of

debris is about to reach me—

Suddenly, a searing pain hits me like the wrath of God. It's as if my skull is breaking open and my body is splitting apart.

As the pain stops, my body is lost in the dust cloud.

◆

Let me rewind a bit.

I was working overtime on a day off in a last-ditch effort to get a long-overdue project completed in time for its final deadline. As a programmer for a subcontracting company, I work on outsourced projects like PC and smartphone games that are commissioned by larger companies.

However shady our company might be, one person never has more than two projects at a time. But because of too many last-minute changes and bugs, the younger programmer assigned to this game had gone AWOL right before it was due! What a loser!

In fact, the job turnover rate here was so high, Junior and I had been the only two programmers in the entire company. Since there was no time to find a last-minute replacement, I got stuck finishing up his projects in addition to my own.

"All right—entry of all classes' input/output and comments, complete. Now I just need to let the auto-documenter prep the docs from the source code and draw up a correlation diagram, and then I can get down to some serious debugging."

I stretched a little, cracking my neck. Looking around, it seemed like all hands were on deck—you never would have guessed it was a holiday. Unfortunately, this was par for the course at my workplace.

At the next desk over, the supervisor for debug commissions was grumbling as he worked, but nobody paid him any mind. Who had the time? The game designers and planners nearby worked alone in silence, all with the same dead, vacant eyes.

By the time I had made coffee and returned to my desk, my PC had finished its processes, and the data needed for debugging was complete. Without this data, it was no wonder my former coworker had done such a terrible job. *I guess it's*

pointless to complain about Junior when they tossed him into the fray without any on-the-job training, huh? There were four programmers working here only half a year ago when he started, and now there's just me, so I think that says more about this company than anything…

"Mr. Sa… Er, Mr. Suzuki—the client is complaining that *WW* is too hard for beginners and asking us to fix it… What should we do?" I looked over my shoulder to see Mr. Tubs, the director and lead designer, looking at me helplessly—as always.

I heard you start to call me Satou, pal. Can't you at least get my name right? I've been on the team for over six months! And why do you look sort of happy about even more problems? I don't get why so many developers are masochists.

WW is short for *War World*, a PC browser game we've been developing in earnest for some time. It's a strategy game with some social media elements, set in a fantasy world.

"Didn't I tell them that if we make it any easier, their target demographic won't play it…?" We'd spent countless meetings with the client deciding on this difficulty level. I guess all those pointless meetings really were, well, pointless. Great.

"Well, they shot this down before, but what if we added a bonus feature where new players get the ability to find all the enemies on the map, plus a three-use-only bomb spell that can wipe them out? We could give them an extra-special title or something if they get through without using it, so the more-skilled gamers can have an incentive not to activate it."

"We don't have much time, so let's go with that. Set it up, would you please, Suzuki?" Mr. Tubs was as carefree with his requests as ever.

"Wait a minute. I'm working on debugging the smartphone MMO right now, so can you get the okay from the client first? If we just stick it in there without asking, we won't have time to change it later if they don't like it."

"All righty, I'll call them right away!" Mr. Tubs waddled away into the smoking area, cell phone in hand.

I resumed my work, grumbling to myself all the while. Before long, Mr. Tubs

gave me the thumbs-up, and it got later and later as I continued working, staving off my hunger with junk food.

Correcting the countless mistakes in Junior's work would take up most of the night before I could finally leave the rest to the debugging team.

What was the name of that game again? Since we always referred to it as "the MMO" or "that RPG," I had forgotten its actual title.

*…Oh, right—"*Freedom Fantasy World." I guess we'd avoided calling it that because it was confusingly similar to *WW*'s old title, *Fantasy War World*. But I did remember that the old spec documents were always labeled *FFW* and so on. Eventually, they took the *Fantasy* out of *WW*'s title, and the RPG's name, which had apparently been temporary, was switched to *Freedom Fantasy Life*, with *FFL* as the new abbreviation. So there was no longer any real cause for confusion, but by then it was already too late.

"Suzuki, we've got a bug report from the group checking Storage."

"What is it this time? If it's about the infinite free items, I already took care of it."

"No, that was a problem with the inventory in *FFL*. This time it's an item duplication bug in *WW*, they said. Could you take a look at the attachment we sent you?"

"Okay. Damn, duplication bugs are always tough to get rid of…"

Ugh. Working on two projects at once is so complicated. By the way, "Storage" doesn't refer to any external storage or hard drives—it's the name of *WW*'s inventory system.

I continued my work correcting errors in *WW*, dealing with each bug report as it came in from the debug team. At some point in the process, Mr. Tubs sent an e-mail asking me to remove the capacity limitations from *WW*'s Storage for the beta test.

He e-mailed because he doesn't want me to yell at him in person, the bastard. I'm definitely gonna make him buy me dinner or something after all this.

The *FFL* debug team needed to check some limitations, too, and asked me to

temporarily deactivate the level restrictions. *Shouldn't that be the server group's job?* I cursed them out under my breath as I worked. *Man, this is going to be another all-nighter, isn't it?*

The error correction continued well into the morning until, miraculously, we were finally able to deliver the *FFL* app to the client. It definitely wasn't bug-free, but fortunately, an advantage of online distribution is the ultimate last-resort weapon known as the "update patch." I could almost hear the users booing me for thinking it, but I was too tired to care.

I made my corrections to the other team's work for *WW* and sent the program file to Mr. Tubs via intercompany mail. After thirty hours without sleep, it was time for a well-earned nap in the peaceful area underneath my desk.

Go ahead and laugh at this corporate slave. Right now, sleep is justice!

◆

Have you ever heard of lucid dreaming?

It's when you're dreaming, but you're aware you're dreaming.

Right then, I was in a desert wasteland.

Yes, a wasteland. If you can picture the Grand Canyon, that should give you an idea.

How did I know this was a dream? For one thing, I remembered falling asleep under my desk just a few moments ago. For another, there were the four icons in the bottom-right corner of my field of vision along with the gadget labeled **Menu** and the radar display in the top right. It was the interface from *WW*, the game I had been working on not long ago.

However! This wasn't the first time I'd taken a nap during a death march and found myself working even in my dreams. That I was doing it in a desert instead of the office or my room was a little weird, but it was probably just because the room I was sleeping in was really dry or something.

The scent of the parched earth tickled my nose. A dream where I could smell things… That was unusual. Through a little trial and error, I figured out that I could open the menu just by thinking about it. To my amusement, some kind of bug prevented me from actually touching it with my hand. Luckily, I could

operate it with my mind, too.

The menu items seemed to be a mix of *FFL* and *WW*, but I guess you couldn't exactly expect dreams to be consistent. My character name was Satou, as usual. People often call me that by mistake, so it's what I generally name my test characters. My status and such were standard for a new level 1 character, and my equipment consisted of the protein bar, wallet, cell phone, and other things I'd had on me when I fell asleep.

Typical half-assed dream logic.

As I surveyed my surroundings, I saw one area where the ground cut off completely. Figuring it was a cliff or something, I headed toward it.

Clearly, I was pretty high up: I was standing on the edge of a steep drop-off that went down at least three hundred feet. Similar pillars of high land rose up from all over the wasteland. At the bottom, the same reddish-brown earth stretched as far as the eye could see.

In the distance, I could see some kind of rift, possibly a canyon. I tried to check it on the map, but everything outside my immediate area was blank. Assuming this dream had a "fog of war" system like *WW* did, I would only be able to see areas I'd explored. A label in the upper left said **Valley of Dragons**, so maybe that's what the rift was? I squinted as best I could, but I didn't see anything that looked like a dragon.

Instead, I saw something very different.

◆

It was emerging from the shadows of the nearest cliff, kicking up a cloud of dust as it came. Like a cavalry charge in a fantasy film.

My eyes instinctively fell on the four icons in the bottom-right corner of my vision: one that read **Search Entire Map** and three that read **Meteor Shower**. The emergency skills for beginners that I'd come up with after the meeting with Mr. Tubs. Driven by a vague sense of unease, I selected the **Search Entire Map** icon.

The radar automatically located any enemies, and a cluster of red dots confirmed the approaching group was hostile. Since the radar's scope was

limited, I opened up the bigger map to check their configuration.

The advancing army was a group of high-level enemies. There were so many of them, the map's entire upper half was flooded with red.

…Isn't this…a bit over the top? There's way too many.

The approaching band was labeled **Elite Lizardmen**. There were around three hundred of them, most about level 50. An unarmed level 1 player like me definitely wouldn't stand a chance.

When the group was less than two thousand feet from the cliff, their marching suddenly halted. I ducked behind a rock, out of sight, and peered out at them.

They seemed like some kind of mounted army, but it was no ordinary cavalry. I could tell their mounts weren't horses, but the dust obscured my view too heavily to determine much else.

One of the riders broke away and came closer to my hiding spot, finally giving me a clearer look. The mount wasn't a horse at all but some kind of velociraptor-like dinosaur, and the armored rider was not a human but a lizardman.

"●●●●●●●!●●●●●●●●●●!●●●●●●●●!"

The lizardman was shouting something in a language I didn't understand, but there was no question that he seemed to have figured out I was here. I guess I could chalk that up to absurd dream logic, too.

He seemed to wait a moment for my reply. When none came, he apparently grew tired of waiting and took up a longbow, aimed it right at me, and drew the bowstring back with a powerful arm. The outline of his body briefly glowed red, but I had no time to worry about that.

The lizardman let his arrow fly, and it cut through the air, whistling straight toward me. Yes, completely straight—it moved in a perfect line, seemingly untouched by gravity. In that instant, I resigned myself to dying in my dream, but the arrow only grazed my cheek as it flew past.

My face felt hot, as if it had been burned. Unconsciously, I put my hand to my cheek and felt something slippery. Looking down, I saw that my fingers were stained red, just as I'd feared.

I touched my tongue to the fresh blood and tasted iron… *Is this really a*

dream…? The question sprang unbidden to my mind.

A thunderous sound like torrential rain interrupted my thoughts. The army was firing on me, their arrows raining down in a perfect arc. I quickly slid into a hollow in the rock—well, I tumbled into it clumsily, to be more accurate.

Before I had a chance to catch my breath, a hail of arrows pierced the ground where my body had been just moments before. The first shafts to land snapped and scattered as the arrows behind them struck home. Eyeing the razor-sharp arrowheads, I shivered as if my back had been doused in cold water.

The arrows accumulated within thirty feet of my hiding place. Those lizardmen were talented marksmen, but I had no time to waste on admiring them.

The only thing on my mind was fear.

Those of you who have been chased by monsters in your dreams will probably understand how I felt.

I had very few options. I could stay there squatting beneath the rock and die, try to run away during a break in the cascade of arrows, or *fight back*.

I selected one of the three **Meteor Shower** icons that were still in the corner of my vision. The icon vanished, leaving behind a temporary trace.

But that was all.

“Oh, come on! Are you telling me the command implementation isn’t working yet?”

As if to further fan my panic, another wave of arrows rained down. Slowly but surely, the barrage was whittling away my hiding place. “Just how strong are these arrows, anyway? Are these guys Robin Hood’s merry band or something?”

Cursing, I selected the two remaining **Meteor Shower** icons. But again, the symbols only disappeared, with no other effect.

One of the arrows finally broke through the rock and grazed my shoulder.

“Damn it! I’m gonna die because of a bug? What kind of sick bad ending is this?” I grumbled, but my anxious complaints soon faded to a weak murmur.

Why? Because I had spotted countless meteorites breaking through the

clouds, crashing down.

I stared stupidly at the sight.

Thanks for your patience—we're finally back to the scene where all this started.

Real name: Ichirou Suzuki.

Character name: Satou.

This is how my life in another world began.

Level Up

Hello, Satou here. Like a typical Japanese worker ant, I've always spent my days neck-deep in my work, but I don't think it ever wore me down so much that I wished I could run away to somewhere else. I was busy, but I felt like my work was worth doing. It's true, I swear!

The pain I felt right before that dust cloud overtook me seemed to have knocked me out for about two hours. The dust had probably been a consequence of all those meteorites hitting the earth, I figured.

The menu displayed the time in a simple format in the corner of my vision. How convenient.

I strained to move my body, which was half-buried in dirt.

Huh? I can't get up…

It felt sort of like when you can't get out of bed on a winter morning. I could move my hands a little, but it was difficult to do much more than sluggishly wiggle my fingers.

CLANK.

The metallic sound shook me out of my half-conscious state. "No way…," I muttered, but deep down I was already sure what it must be. The lizardman who had fired the first arrow before.

As if to confirm my suspicions, a single red dot came into view on my radar. The lizardman on my still-open map screen was the only enemy left alive. How could he have survived all three of those ridiculous meteor attacks? I didn't think that was possible. Maybe he had avoided the bulk of the strikes by being closer to me than the others?

"I guess I lose this round, huh?" I grumbled. I was somewhat frustrated, but for the most part the lethargic state of my body seemed to have dragged my

mind down into resignation as well.

CLANK.

But when I saw the enemy appear at the top of the cliff, that apathy of a player who'd just lost a strategy game vanished completely. The lizardman was bleeding from all over his body, staining the remains of his tattered blue armor red. He spat out a spear he'd had clenched in his teeth onto the cliff and hauled himself forward.

At that moment, his gaze fell on me and refused to break away. My arms and legs shook pathetically. I've had dreams before where I wanted to run away and couldn't move, but I've never dreamed anything that made me tremble so much.

Using the spear as a cane, the warrior shambled toward me, dragging along his broken leg. The thing's body was absolutely covered in wounds. If I'd reacted a little sooner, I might have been able to catch him by surprise with a body slam and knock him off the edge of the cliff—but it was too late for that now.

Despite his battered state, the lizardman's eyes were still burning for a fight. He definitely wanted to kill me. He pulled a sword from the scabbard at his waist—and tossed it at my feet. The sudden movement knocked off a piece of his armor and sent it clattering to the ground.

Now that he'd gotten this close to me, the smell of blood was so strong that I nearly gagged. It would have been far too realistic, if not for the HP gauge floating to the right of the lizardman's head. Underneath was the label **Lizardman: Level 50**.

It seemed to be some kind of augmented reality (AR) feature resembling the ones used nowadays in smartphone games and the like. "Is this supposed to be a game?" I grunted, trying to trick my limbs into moving. For some reason, my body felt a little lighter as I did so.

"●●●●!●●●!"

I had no idea what the lizardman was saying to me, but I could guess. "You want me to take this sword and fight?" Barely recovered, I struggled to get my body to move, reaching for the sword. As silly as it might seem, considering I was dreaming, the fear I felt was completely real.

I gripped the weapon as if grasping at a straw. At that moment, for whatever reason, it didn't occur to me to beg for my life.

"●●●●!"

My mind raced. I had never taken any kind of fencing or kendo lessons. I hadn't even lifted a hoe on a farm or used a mallet to make mochi on New Year's Eve. So my only experience with a blade was what I'd seen in anime and manga and stuff like that, with no actual bearing in reality.

"●●●●!"

I grasped the sword tight with both shaking hands and desperately planted my feet. The lizardman sneered as he readied his spear. Unlike my fake swordsmanship, my opponent's posture showed a high level of mastery.

The word he kept repeating is difficult to describe—I might spell it out as *mokuugwa* or *makueuga*. Of course, I had no idea what it meant.

"●●●●!" As he shouted, he jabbed the glowing red spear into my shoulder. It hurt—a lot. I've heard people say you feel heat more than pain with a stab wound, but no, it was pretty much just pain. It was unbearable. My mind was too focused on my shoulder to come up with any sort of action to take.

Pulling the spear out of me, the lizardman then stabbed at my leg as if toying with me. As the spear pierced my thigh, I was struck with a fresh wave of agony and toppled unceremoniously onto my backside.

Considering how pathetic I was, I wouldn't have been surprised if I'd passed out from the pain at that point, but instead, for some strange reason I stopped feeling it. Maybe it was my imagination, but my fear seemed to be fading, too. Perhaps I was so scared, my emotional limiter had snapped?

My arms and legs stopped shaking, and I was finally able to think straight. The HP gauge I could see by my opponent's head was nearly zero, but I doubted I could fight him and win. If I tried coming at him with my sword, surely he'd easily counter my attack and put a quick end to things by slashing my throat.

Luckily, it looked like my enemy's movements were as pained as mine. I had to create some kind of opening while he was tormenting me and make a break for it.

As I stood up, I grabbed a fistful of the dry soil. Throwing dirt in an opponent's

eyes might be cheap, but I didn't have the luxury of a fair fight right now. I watched the lizardman carefully and struck his spear with my sword just as he drew back. I must have underestimated my remaining strength, because the shove threw him off-balance.

Now's my chance!

I flung the dirt at his face with all my might. It scattered in midair, but enough of it still reached the creature's face. Unfortunately, my opponent was a step ahead of me—he defended himself by throwing an arm up in front of his eyes.

Damn it, you're supposed to be mortally wounded! But at least his arm was blocking his vision. Aiming for his legs, I swung my weapon and let go, flinging it forward. But I had apparently swung too hard—it flew toward the lizardman's torso instead.

I had planned to run away the moment I released the sword, but the scene unfolding before my eyes stopped me in my tracks.

"Huh?!"

The sword had left my hands with shocking speed and cut right through the lizardman's middle, dividing him in half. Blood gushed out of his severed body.

Oh god… I'm not good with gory stuff. And I'd never seen anything so gruesome before, not even in movies.

"He's disappearing…" Just like an enemy in a video game, the lizardman's corpse was fading away. However, the traces of blood left behind were proof that the battle had been no illusion.

I sat down hard on the ground and looked up at the sky, then finally took a deep breath. *Whew! This dream is exhausting… If I have to dream something so realistic, couldn't I be on a tropical beach or something, making out with hot girls in bikinis?*

◆

I took off my polo shirt to try to treat my wounds. It was chilly, but not so much that I'd catch a cold. Putting it into Storage, I used my T-shirt to wipe off the blood.

Strangely enough, I'd stopped bleeding. I would've expected a stab wound from a spear to last a lot longer. When I rubbed at the hardened blood with my finger, it fell away in clumps. Underneath it was perfectly clear skin—not even so much as a scar.

The pain had stopped, too, I realized. Maybe this gamelike dream had a system where you healed automatically after clearing a mission? I opened the status screen to confirm; sure enough, my HP had been fully restored. On closer inspection, in fact, my maximum HP had increased. Not only that, but my level had jumped from 1 to 310!

The crazy speed of that sword throw before must have been because of my high level. My strength, as well as all my other stats, had been raised all the way to the max value.

I must have leveled up so much because of all the enemies I defeated with those Meteor Showers. Wanting to see the aftermath of the Meteor Showers, I looked over the edge of the cliff. The scenery below was terrifying. A veil of dust still hung in the air, obscuring the wasteland, but the ground I could make out through it was dotted with craters. The area where the army had stood was thoroughly pockmarked, too.

My assumption had probably been right: The lizardman I'd fought before must have escaped a direct hit from the meteorites because he was some distance away from the rest of the group. Since he had still been on the verge of death, the shock waves alone must have been incredibly powerful.

As for the canyon in the distance, the Valley of Dragons, it seemed like a good deal of the area had caved in. It looked less like the aftermath of a magical in-game attack and more like the battered surface of the moon. Well, that was only to be expected if a small pocket of land was hammered with three attacks of more than a hundred meteorites each, I guess.

The scenery looked like something from a movie, so maybe that was why it didn't feel real. *Ah, right—this is a dream anyway…isn't it?* It was too vivid for a dream, yet far too strange to be real life. If anything, it seemed more likely I was inside a game.

Well, if this is a game, you'd think beating all those enemies would trigger some sort of event.

Trying to gather more information, I looked at the log screen. It started with the message Welcome to our world. Normally, this would seem like a pretty significant statement, but since *FFL* starts with that same message, I skimmed past it.

The log showed what icons I had used, the defeats of the lizardmen and other enemies, and the defeat of some dragons that had apparently been the former rulers of the Valley of Dragons. It also included notifications of level-ups and the acquisition of various titles and then, finally, my victory over the last lizardman. After this was a line that said Source: Conquered the Valley of Dragons, but I had no idea what that meant and simply ignored it.

Next was a log of all the spoils I'd gained in battle. Even the corpse of that

lizardman was listed among the loot, which would explain why it had disappeared. *Am I supposed to become a necromancer now, or what?*

Remembering my opponent's graphic death, I made a Graveyard folder in my Storage and stowed all the corpses in there. After a moment's thought, I gazed at the folder and clasped my hands together in a brief prayer.

As I continued checking my status, I noticed that those emergency skills for beginners that I'd used earlier had been registered in the magic menu. I hadn't been able to access that menu, but now it seemed I could use the new magic skills on the list if I selected and enabled them.

I wish this dream didn't have all these annoying systems.

Testing out Search Entire Map wouldn't necessarily prove its effectiveness, so I decided to try out the Meteor Shower spell. A quick check of the map confirmed that I was alone, so it shouldn't be a problem. I had to test it out while I had the chance, lest I find myself in a dilemma and try to use it only to get a NOT ENOUGH MP message or something.

I selected **Meteor Shower** in the magic menu and chose **use**. Perhaps because there weren't any enemies on the map, a pop-up appeared that said **Please select a target**. *I guess I have to mark a target area for destructive magic, like in* WW. I picked a site about three times as far away as the Valley of Dragons.

Apparently, this was good enough, because my MP meter decreased immediately. I felt like something was being drawn out of my body, much more intensely than when I had used Search Entire Map. This hadn't happened the first time I used these skills, probably because I wasn't using my own magic power then. This time, my MP went down by a thousand points or so, about a third of my total.

I looked up at the sky. No meteorites yet. Going by the first time, they should be showing up any moment now. Finally, I saw something burst through the clouds like before, but…

What's going on? They're HUGE!

The boulders streaking toward the ground were almost a hundred times the size of the rocks I'd summoned before. No, considering how far away they were,

they must have been even bigger. Before I could start wondering why, I instinctively broke into a run. Away from the hail of meteorites, obviously!

Meteorites probably wasn't the right word for these giant chunks of rock tearing through the atmosphere. A wave of sound bore down on me so hard my skin rippled, and I ran even faster, shrieking at a volume that rivaled the thunderous roar. I have no idea what I actually screamed, if anything. I do remember the incredibly strong air resistance, like I was running through water.

As I fled, I eventually noticed that I was going way too fast, but it was too late to hit the brakes. I braced my legs with all my strength, but I still couldn't stop. The physical stress shredded my sneakers like scraps of paper. My heel smashed through a rock, and when my hands hit the ground, my fingers carved out ten grooves in the stone.

But even that wasn't enough to stop my movement, and I went flying off the edge of the cliff into the air. Since I'd managed to kill most of my momentum, I was able to land on a protruding rock formation about fifteen feet down.

Man, that was three times scarier than a free fall.

Periodic tremors in the earth made it impossible to stand. I clung to the protrusion, not wanting to fall all the way down. A tidal wave of dirt, like a muddy river, flooded across the ground. Occasionally, I'd see rocks the size of a car rolling along with the dust, sending a shiver up my spine.

Once the earth had stopped shaking, I attempted to climb back up the escarpment to see the results of the Meteor Shower. The air was still hazy with debris, so I wrapped my T-shirt around my face in lieu of a mask. It smelled of blood a little, but it was better than breathing in dust and having a coughing fit.

When I pressed my fingers into the cliff face, they made little finger-size holes. The rock didn't seem to be particularly brittle, so I was able to climb up with relative ease.

Upon reaching the top again, I remembered that I was now barefoot, so I searched through my Storage. I found some sandals and tried taking them out, but they were covered in blood, so I hastily put them back.

If I have to use something bloody anyway, it might as well be my own blood. I

took the red-stained polo shirt out of Storage, ripped it in two, and wrapped each half around one of my feet. Not exactly stylish, but it would do for now.

When I raised my head and peered into the distance, I saw something that looked like a mushroom cloud. Moving to the edge of the cliff, I could make out a red light on the surface. Was it lava that had burst out from underground, maybe? It might have just been fire, but since I couldn't tell from here what the situation was, I decided to look at the map.

I switched the map display from 2-D to 3-D. Judging by the fact that my target marker was now floating in midair, the ground must have collapsed considerably. The land around where the meteors had struck was warped and distorted, too.

Gazing at the mushroom cloud, I silently opened the magic menu and switched the Meteor Shower spell from **enabled** to **disabled**, rendering it unusable.

This spell is dangerous. If I used it over and over, I'd turn right into a demon lord. They say a wise man stays away from danger, so I was better off keeping it sealed away.

The reason it was so much stronger than the first time was the increase in my level or my intelligence stat, or so I figured. And it looked like my other attributes had powered up, too. That I was able to make holes in the rock with my fingers was probably thanks to a heightened strength stat, and my ability to endure the recoil from that was probably my higher stamina. And that mad dash that was fast enough to create air resistance must have been my agility stat at work.

I picked up a pebble and fiddled with it experimentally, but luckily, it seemed like I was able to control my new strength perfectly. I didn't feel any stronger than usual as I held it then rolled it around between my fingers. But when I tried for a moment to use enough force to break it, it crumbled in my hand.

At one point, I'd accidentally sneezed while holding the pebble, but I didn't crush it or anything. That was a relief.

Maybe it was all the dust blowing around, but the weather was starting to look dodgy, so I found a tent in my spoils and set it up to take a break. Munching on a protein bar, I found a Well Bag among my loot, which I used to quench my thirst. Apparently, this was some kind of Magic Item that never ran out of water. Very convenient, but trying to figure out how it worked seemed like it could keep me

up at night, so I decided not to think about it too much.

Rain had started falling at some point, and it seemed unlikely to let up anytime soon. Since I had some time to kill, I decided to check out the rest of my spoils.

Most of the items were damaged to some extent, probably squashed by the meteorites. There were all kinds of tools, equipment, and everyday necessities, but with most of them broken, I made a few dedicated folders and set them aside.

There were tons of gold coins, silver coins, and all manner of jewels, too. I guess it's true that dragons like shiny things. I found all kinds of currency from various places, and I quickly lost interest in sorting through it. The most numerous were the gold coins from someplace called the Flue Kingdom, of which I had more than ten million—a preposterous 303 tons. Maybe the humans there had been forced to make periodic tributes to the dragons?

I don't know if this is a dream or a game or what, but if I find my way to a human civilization, it looks like I won't need to worry about money. I hope there's no bartering system…

Among my Magic Items were all manner of Holy Swords, Divine Blades, and the like, plus something called a Magic Gun. Somewhere in the recesses of my mind, my middle school self was going nuts. All the swords had stupid names like Excalibur and Durandal, but since it was my dream, I guess I had my own subconscious to thank for that.

Possibly as some kind of antitheft measure, the Holy Swords unleashed a static-like shock that damaged me when I pulled them out, so I put them away for the time being. I'd been able to use them for only a minute, but the swords emitted a pretty blue light when I did. The light faded after a brief moment, though, so maybe they just glowed in the dark.

Moving on, I took the Magic Gun out of Storage and fired it experimentally at a nearby rock. There was a little bit of lag between when I pulled the trigger and when the gun fired, but it was still pretty powerful.

At any rate, now that I'd played around for a bit, it was time to get back to the work of sorting all my items.

◆

Before I knew it, the rain had stopped.

I think I must have dozed off while sorting. This was much more sleep than I'd gotten in a while, so I woke up feeling refreshed. That I was able to sleep so soundly on a cliff like this shows just how exhausted I'd been.

I poured water into a pail I'd found in Storage and used it to wash my face.

…Huh? Wait, something didn't look quite right there.

I looked again. Something was definitely off. Pulling out the flip phone from my pocket, I snapped a selfie.

"Yeesh! This is what I looked like as a first-year in high school…" Maybe it was just my imagination, but even my voice sounded younger. Well, I guess it wasn't that unusual to dream about being a student again.

Having gotten a good night's rest, I figured it was probably time to move on, since there wasn't much else to do here. Looking at the map, I found an area called the Soldiers' Stronghold about sixty miles to the west. It seemed to be devoid of life, and it was on the very edge of my map, so I wasn't sure what the situation might be beyond it.

But I didn't see any other significant man-made landmarks, so I figured I might as well start in that direction.

Before heading out, I opened up the skill screen to mess around a little. I had ignored it yesterday, but it looked like a lot of new skills had appeared on the list. I counted eleven in total: "One-Handed Sword," "Throwing," "Evasion," "Parry," "Practical Magic: Other World," "Summoning Magic: Other World," "Fear Resistance," "Pain Resistance," "Self-Healing," "Observation," and "Ancient Scalefolk Language."

Maybe I had just learned them by leveling up, but it seemed like there would be more if that was the case. Did I acquire skills through my actions somehow?

Skill levels ranged from 1 to 10, and you could enhance them by allotting skill points to them. It was a simple conversion rate of one point for each level, and I currently had 3,100 points left, so I just leveled them up as I saw fit.

I didn't want a repeat of that lizardman encounter, so I started by maxing out any skills that had to do with resistance or seemed like they'd be useful in combat. It looked like you could also turn them on and off after allotting points.

I descended from the cliff and ran along the ground.

I was wearing an item I'd found in my Storage called Wing Shoes. The ambiguous flavor text stated that they **make small adjustments for walking a difficult path**, but at any rate, they were certainly sturdy. I'd changed my clothes as well, into a robe I found in my spoils made of something called Yuriha fiber.

Presumably because of my increased stats, I was moving at almost forty miles per hour, yet I didn't feel tired or out of breath at all. Worrying about it too much threatened to make me trip on my own feet, though, so I tried to just focus on running.

With the morning sun at my back, I cleared my mind and kept moving forward.

Hmm? What was that?

As I bounded toward the Soldiers' Stronghold, I felt myself breaking through some kind of membrane. I slowed down to have a look. About a mile away from the Stronghold, there seemed to be a thin force field.

As I gazed at the invisible wall for a moment, an AR display popped up with the label **Valley of Dragons: Barrier**. A barrier… Just one more fantasy cliché, I guess.

There was a little bit of resistance, but it seemed like I could go in and out pretty easily. It seemed to halt air movement—when I kicked up a cloud of dust, it stopped at the invisible wall. Even the vegetation seemed to be different on either side—the reddish-brown wasteland turned light brown, with a few weeds sprouting here and there.

Well, I guess it was a wasteland either way, but still.

I removed the piece of cloth I'd wrapped around my mouth and took a deep breath at last. Ahh…the air tasted great. It was dry, but that was pretty normal for what seemed to be a winter climate.

Not long after passing through the barrier, I arrived at my current goal, the Soldiers' Stronghold. It was a compact stone fortress, with a mortar plaza that

seemed to be some kind of arena. The outer walls were crumbling; it was even more abandoned than I'd expected. I had known from the map that there was nobody there, but the place seemed like it had been empty for a very long time, as it was overrun with dust and spiderwebs.

I searched around the inside and outside of the stronghold, but aside from some gravestones in the shadow of the arena, I didn't find much of anything.

Since this seemed to be the edge of the Valley of Dragons, the scope of my radar was reduced to only a few dozen feet. Looking at the map, I saw that the name in the upper-left corner had changed from **Valley of Dragons** to **Shiga Kingdom: Seiryuu County**. *Hmm. So this is some kind of monarchy, huh?*

If this were a legend or myth, I'd probably meet a beautiful princess and fall in love or something—but given my personality, I was way more likely to be a supporting character who cheers on the hero from the sidelines.

I didn't know how long this dream was going to go on, but it could have at least thrown in a lovable busty maid.

I decided to use the Search Entire Map function to investigate Seiryuu County, but first, I did a few experiments. It seemed like the AR screen had only basic menu functionality, while the spell offered more detailed information.

Still experimenting, I opened the map and inspected the nearest populated area. This worked similarly to the one in *WW*, and once I'd used Search Entire Map, I could freely refine it to show human or animal life, not just the terrain.

Apparently, the closest civilized area was a place called Seiryuu City, about twelve miles away. There was another city, too, but that one was hidden away in some mountains roughly thirty miles out, so I nixed it. I saw plenty of villages, too, but Seiryuu City was still closest, so it didn't make sense to traipse all the way out there.

Seiryuu County stretched about forty miles in all directions. Bigger than Tokyo but smaller than Chiba, maybe? This was stuff I'd learned making models in middle school, so I didn't have a lot of confidence in my estimate.

On the way to Seiryuu City, maybe three miles from here, there was an army of about one hundred people. The average level of the soldiers was 7, with the

highest being 31.

That seems surprisingly low…, I thought, as I looked closer at the map. There were less than ten people in the entire area above level 40 and none at all above level 50. It was probably safe to assume 310 was a pretty high level, then.

Still, I don't like trouble, so I decided to take a roundabout path so as to avoid encountering the army. Maybe I was being a little overly cautious despite being in a dream, but I didn't want to make any more frightening memories.

As I went on my way to Seiryuu City, a red dot suddenly appeared on my radar, racing straight toward me. I was traveling through a rocky area with lots of ups and downs, so even if I looked in the direction of the dot, I couldn't see anything.

Examining my map, I discovered it was a level 30 wyvern. I wanted to check it out, so I hopped onto a nearby rock formation.

"Ngh?!"

As I leaped up, I crashed headfirst into the wyvern, and the collision sent me tumbling to the ground.

Ohh, my head…

I'd rolled down along no less than thirty feet of rocky ground before smashing into a rock face. Good thing I had that "Pain Resistance" skill…and a high VIT stat, I guess. Despite all that bumping around, I didn't have a single wound. *I've gotten pretty sturdy, haven't I?*

The beast had flown back up into the sky and was circling around, waiting for the right time to attack. Judging by the size of the head I'd smacked into earlier, I'd say its wingspan was about one hundred feet. Its body looked closer to a pteranodon than a dragon, I thought. And the stinger on the end of its long tail was a typical fantasy add-on for this kind of creature.

Trying to make a diversion, I chucked a nearby pebble at the circling predator.

Huh? I'd just wanted to distract it, but the stone pierced right through the wyvern's wing and disappeared into the sky beyond. If this had been a manga, I got the feeling there would've been a twinkle and a little *shing!* sound effect as the projectile soared away.

It may have pierced the creature's wing, but the pebble had still been only a small one, so it wasn't enough to bring it down. Still, it served the purpose of driving it away. The wyvern flew off toward a distant cliff, tracing an unsteady path through the air.

Oh dear. It was heading in the direction of that army.

The knight leading the party was a higher level than the wyvern, so I figured they'd probably be fine, but still… I felt kind of bad for sending it their way in the first place, so I decided to go check things out, just in case.

◆

I scaled the sixty-foot cliff in only three jumps. I probably could have done it in two, but the branches jutting out from the rock face were in the way.

As I ascended, I saw the wyvern circling above new prey. Jumping over a few large rocks at the top, I could see the monster's target—the army down below. They were probably about eight hundred, maybe a thousand feet away.

I could hear the commander's voice from here, but no matter how hard I strained, I couldn't understand what he was saying. Of course, I speak only Japanese and a little bit of broken English, but usually I can at least guess what language I'm hearing. This time, though, it was apparently a language I'd never heard before. And it wasn't just some gibberish nonsense like you often hear in dreams—it sounded like it had a real structure.

Come to think of it, the lizardmen's language was like that, too, wasn't it? It was getting harder and harder to believe this was really a dream, but…the alternative was too frightening, so I tried to press on with the conviction that this was all in my mind.

Once I'd properly escaped from thinking about my situation, I checked in on my skill menu, and sure enough, a new skill called "Shigan Language" had appeared. For now, I decided to allot one point to it.

"Everyone! Line up—quickly!"

Aha! It wasn't perfect, but I could understand the gist of the commander's words. I added on a few more points. Before long, I could tell he'd said, "All hands, form a circle! Quickly, now!" I could comfortably understand the

language at around five points, it seemed. Just to try it out, I raised the skill points to the max of ten, but after six or so, it didn't make much of a difference.

Aside from the language, I'd also gained seven more skills somewhere along the way: "Hand-to-Hand Combat," "Sprinting," "Spatial Mobility," "Long-Distance Vision," "Telescopic Sight," "Keen Hearing," and "Lip Reading." In *WW* and *FFL*, gaining skills usually involved clearing fairly difficult quests and missions, but the process seemed a lot easier in this dream.

I'd turned off the log screen display, since it got in the way when I was moving, but I wanted to know how I was acquiring skills, so I set it up so I could see just a few lines at a time in the corner of my vision. For the moment, I divvied out some points to skills that seemed useful for watching the show—er, for keeping an eye on the situation: "Long-Distance Vision," "Telescopic Sight," "Keen Hearing," and "Observation."

The army had huddled into a circular formation to fend off the wyvern. When I concentrated on them, my new skills kicked in—I could see them as if looking through binoculars. How was it that my field of vision remained the same, yet whatever I focused on became as clear as if I'd zoomed in? I decided to save that investigation for another time and turned my attention to the matter at hand.

A row of heavily armored soldiers with large shields manned the outside of the circle, while inside, there were two rows of more lightly equipped soldiers with long spears. The way the points all shifted to match the movements of the circling wyvern made the formation look like some sort of living creature. After the spearmen, a group of archers knelt in standby position, ready to loose.

"Don't be afraid, soldiers! Remember your training!"

"Let's show that thing the spirit of Seiryuu!"

Voices called out from the within the ring, encouraging the frightened soldiers.

Well, yeah… It was only natural to be afraid of a monster like that.

In the very center of the circle stood a robed, staff-wielding figure, presumably a sorcerer. To the figure's left and right were two female soldiers, lightly armored and holding what looked like conductor's batons. At first I thought they were guns, but the AR label that popped up informed me they were called **short**

wands. Apparently, the women wielding them were known as **magic soldiers**. So the two women were magic users, too… Then why weren't they wearing robes?

A group of soldiers standing near the trio appeared to be the sorcerers' escorts. And outside the circle, eight or so knights trotted around on horseback. It looked almost like they were moving behind the four ranks of troops, putting the circle between them and the wyvern. These guys were covered from head to toe in shining, silvery full-plate armor, so why were they using the rest of the army as a shield?

"Here it comes! Spearmen, don't let your spear tips wave around in the air! Plant the end in the ground and drive it in with your feet. If it's loose, the wyvern's attack will knock it right out of your hands!"

"Archers, hold—wait until it is frightened by the spears and slows its speed!"

The commander's meticulous instructions were probably only frightening these poor soldiers even more, not reassuring them. Possibly that was why each time the monster attacked, they only staved it off with their spears without making much of a counterattack.

The archers were pretty skilled, seeing as about 90 percent of the arrows hit their mark. But it seemed like most of them just bounced off the wyvern without causing damage. Was the creature's skin just that tough, or was it because their level wasn't high enough? I couldn't tell.

But, just like a critical hit in a game, one of the girls guarding the sorcerers managed to pierce the wyvern's hide with an arrow.

Around this point, I noticed there were more soldiers in the forest some distance from the circle. At a glance, they appeared lightly outfitted—perhaps they were noncombat personnel, like military engineers or transportation officers, taking refuge from the battle.

…Which meant the army had most likely challenged the wyvern expecting to win. I'd planned to help out by scaring it away with rocks if necessary, but it seemed like I'd worried for nothing.

I stowed away the rock in Storage and settled in to watch how this army would fight.

The wyvern repeatedly swooped down to attack, but the encircled troops simply repelled it each time with their spear wall and short bolts they shot from their crossbows.

Finally, during the fourth attack, something changed. Just as it started to return to the sky after another failed attack, its balance faltered, as if one of its wings had suddenly lost its lift. The beast crashed into the ground unnaturally, like a giant invisible hammer had struck it.

This must have been some kind of magic at work.

When the wyvern had lost its balance, I'd heard one of the sorcerers in the center chanting a rhythmic, almost synthetic-sounding song, ending with a shouted word: ***"Turbulence!"***

The last part must have been a trigger word or something—I heard it almost in stereo. It was like she'd spoken an ancient word and its modern equivalent at the same time; my brain processed the modern word in Japanese (*rankiryuu*) and the ancient word in English ("turbulence"). It was pretty fascinating.

Apparently, the spell that had delivered the final blow to bring down the wyvern was called Air Hammer. This was the first time I had heard a magic spell being chanted, but I had to wonder how the incantations in this world were pronounced. I could understand the final trigger words, but the chant itself seemed more like a series of bizarre sounds than actual words. It was almost like if you used music software to generate a series of notes on a PC.

While pointless details once again distracted me, the battle had progressed.

The wyvern was making revolting shrieks as it dragged itself along the ground, but its HP bar indicated it hadn't actually taken all that much damage.

But the sorcerers seemed to have done their job well.

The creature spread its wings in an attempt to fly, but the mounted knights pierced them with their lances. Still, its HP was down by only about 20 percent.

A particularly high-level knight skillfully pinned one of the wings to the ground, trapping the wyvern on its back. The other knights worked together to immobilize the other wing, but a single flap sent them flying back several feet, horses and all.

They had pinned the monster less than three hundred feet away from the rock I was hiding behind. *I might be a little too close…*

"…■■■ ■■ ***Lightning Bolt*** *Inazuma!"*

The sorcerer in the center of the circle brought down a flash of lightning on the wyvern. It wasn't an all-out thunderbolt, but the roaring sound and white flash still pained my eyes and ears. I guess there were some disadvantages to the "Keen Hearing" and "Long-Distance Vision" skills.

My ears were still ringing, so I didn't hear any orders, but the soldiers broke into three groups, surrounding the wyvern with spears in hand. The sorcerers from the center scattered into three groups, too, alongside their escorts.

Even pinned to the ground and numbed by the lightning, the wyvern still struggled violently. Thrashing the stinger on its tail and snapping its beak, it seemed to be landing a few hits on the soldiers' ranks. Even at point-blank range, the spears and crossbows of the soldiers could hardly pierce the thick hide, but little by little it was taking damage.

The wyvern's defeat seemed imminent, but it had apparently been waiting for its chance. Aiming at a soldier who'd carelessly gotten too close, it swung its long tail and landed a direct hit.

Possibly loosened by the force of that movement, the creature's wings flapped open, and it charged toward the nearest cliff.

In other words, my hiding place.

"Stop that thing! Zena!"

"Yes, sir!"

The commander shouted what sounded like a ridiculous command at the closest magic soldier. The soldiers in front of her, though visibly alarmed by the attacking monster, resolutely steadied their spears to stop it.

These troops may have been frightened, but they had pretty high morale. If I were in their shoes, I'd be running away at full speed.

"…■ ■■■ ***Air Cushion*** *Kiheki!"*

Charging at the speed of an Olympic sprinter, the wyvern crashed into an

invisible wall just a few feet from the magic soldier. I couldn't see the wall, but the cloud of dirt and weeds suggested it was about as big as a few soccer goals stacked on top of one another.

Since the situation had nothing to do with me, I could afford to relax as I assessed it, but for the soldiers involved, it was no laughing matter. Apparently, even magic wasn't enough to change the laws of physics, because the wyvern and the soldier who'd made the barrier were both affected by the blowback.

The wyvern pitched forward onto the ground, but the small magic soldier was forcefully sent flying. The spell must have worked just like a cushion; she was knocked into the air, but not enough to crush her. It was probably no worse than taking a powerful punch.

Immediately, two spells shot toward the scene of the clash.

"…■■■ ■■ ***Lightning Bolt*** *Inazuma!"*

"…■ ■■■ ***Resist Fall*** *Rakkasokudo Keigen!"*

The former finished off the wyvern with another flash of lightning, while the latter was a spell to slow the fall of the magic soldier whirling through the air. At first, I wasn't sure what kind of magic it was, but since I could see her downward speed visibly drop, it was easy enough to figure out.

The problem was that her horizontal velocity didn't slow at all. She was at least sixty-five feet in the air, and at the rate she was going, she'd pass over my head and fly straight over the precipice behind me.

Their battle had felt so real, I didn't even stop to think that this was only a dream or anything like that. I just turned on my heel and ran, moving along the top of a thick dead branch that jutted out toward the cliff.

It was a little frightening, but even if I fell at this height, I'd be fine. I knew that from personal experience…unfortunately.

I stopped right at the end of the branch and stretched out my hand. But it wasn't quite enough.

Below me, I saw another, slightly longer branch, so I jumped down to it, reaching out as far as I could. This time I made it! As if it had been waiting for me

to grab her cloak, the fall reduction spell wore off, and the magic soldier's weight returned to normal.

Crap. I reached a little too far.

The girl's weight was dragging me down with her. I clung to the tree branch and managed to stop both of us from falling. I shifted my posture, hoisting her up with a hand under her chest. If this were a light novel or manga, it would be the perfect time for some accidental raunchiness, but I regret to inform you that all I felt was the cold, hard metal of her breastplate. It was a bit disappointing, sure, but this wasn't exactly the right situation for that kind of thing, anyway, so I just adjusted my grip and carried her back toward the root of the branch.

The magic soldier was unconscious, apparently having fainted when she collided with the wyvern. Brushing aside her sweat-drenched bangs, I saw that she had a sweet, gentle face. According to the AR display, she was Zena Marienteil, seventeen years old. It seemed that she was from a long line of hereditary knights. Did that make her some sort of aristocrat? I wasn't sure.

If I had to sum up her appearance, I'd say she was slender, plain, and beautiful: the type who'd probably be oblivious to her own popularity with the guys. Her light-golden hair was woven into a braid, and some kind of armored headpiece protected her small head.

Long lashes adorned her closed eyelids, and the eyebrows that had been hidden by her bangs painted a strong line, though I couldn't tell if they were drawn on or not. I didn't see any makeup on her, and she had a good complexion, her lips a soft-looking pink.

The girl didn't seem to be wearing any perfume, but there was still a faintly sweet, feminine scent mixed in with the smell of sweat. She wore leather armor over her long-sleeve shirt and trousers, along with heavy boots and the durable cloak on her shoulders that had saved her life. She must have dropped her short wand, though, because her hands were empty.

I had been too frantic to notice before, but messages about new skills and titles had appeared in my log.

> Title Acquired: Lifesaver

> Skill Acquired: "Transport"

Apparently, titles were just as easy to acquire as skills.

"Mm…where am I?"

"Oh, you're awake?" She had just come to, so I issued a quick warning. "I recommend you hold off on looking down."

"Huh? Aaah!" As a soldier, it seemed like her only reaction to being on a thin branch on the side of a cliff was a short cry of alarm.

"Are you hurt?"

"I'm still a little numb all over, but I don't think I'm injured anywhere…" Maybe she wasn't used to being near men, but she seemed a bit uncomfortable with my carrying her, so I helped her up onto the base of the sturdier branch above.

"Ah, ow…"

"Are you all right?"

It seemed to hurt her to put weight on her foot, so I quickly moved to support her. She must have hurt her ankle when the wyvern sent her flying. It didn't look broken, but it was probably sprained.

"Thank you very much. Where are we? Last I remember, I was fighting a wyvern…"

"You fell right out of the sky! I happened to be climbing up the cliff here."

"I fell from up there?" The girl looked up at the top of the rock wall, dumbfounded. It was about fifteen feet above us, maybe around a three-story climb.

"I think some kind of magic slowed down your fall, which is why I was able to catch you."

"Really? Then you saved my life," she said, shyly thanking me. She was slightly taller than me, but maybe because her chin was lowered, she seemed to be looking up at me. She had a pretty powerful smile.

If I were still a high school student, I'm sure it would have been love at first sight.

But I'm not some pervert who falls in love with girls over ten years younger than me, so obviously that didn't apply.

"No, not at all. My name is Satou. I'm just a humble traveling peddler." This occupation was the backstory I'd come up with on the way here. Judging by the feudal fantasy setting, there was a chance that normal citizens would have their movement limited, and if I just said I was a traveler, I might be mistaken for a thief. It might have been silly to take all these precautions in a dream, but given how real things had been so far, I wouldn't be surprised if I got imprisoned or something.

Trying to lend more authenticity to my story, I looked her in the eyes as I spoke.

"I-I-I'm Zena, a magic soldier and a vassal of Count Seiryuu. I've served in his army for two years. I'm seventeen years old, unmarried, and s-single!"

Uh…nobody asked any of that, but okay.

Zena seemed a little frantic, but her expression was sincere as she told me about her family structure and such. I nodded along and gave one-syllable responses where necessary, all the while gauging the best route up the wall.

“Excuse me for a second. I’m going to jump a few times.” Carrying her with both arms, I hopped lightly in place. She seemed surprised but not in pain. “Hang on—I’m going to take us up.”

“Huh? Up this cliff?!”

“Yes—there’s a surprising number of footholds, so it should be easy enough. Let’s go!” Making sure she was holding on tightly, I leaped lightly from foothold to foothold. I tried to use my entire body, not just my knees, like a spring to absorb the shock of each jump so as not to jostle her.

“We’re here.”

“Phew… You’re very agile, aren’t you?”

Zena still clung to me, and I could feel her heart pounding through her armor. Her cheeks seemed flushed as she looked up, and her voice was shaky as she spoke.

What an unusual girl.

She still seemed scared, because she made no effort to get down, so I continued carrying her as we crossed the rocky plateau, taking her back toward her friends.

“Stop right there! Who are you? Let go of her!”

A petite woman stood challenging me from the top of a large rock. One of Zena’s colleagues, presumably. She scowled at me, her crossbow at the ready.

“W-wait, Lilio! He’s fine!”

“Be quiet, Zenacchi!”

Zena tried to intervene on my behalf, but the other party wasn’t having any of it. Well, that was a normal reaction, I suppose. Carefully, I lowered her to the ground in a sitting position.

“Good. Now get back!”

“*Lilio!* This person saved my life!”

Once I had backed away far enough, a heavily armored female soldier emerged quickly from the shadow of the cliff and rushed over to Zena, lifted her up, and carried her back toward the rock face. In her place, another armored woman emerged, pointing her large broadsword at me. Zena could be heard protesting on the other side, but the woman refused to lower her sword.

…I mean, I *did* save her life, but okay.

“Name yourself.”

I couldn’t see her face under her headgear, but the soldier’s voice was kind of sultry. Judging by the curves that her armor couldn’t entirely disguise, she was definitely a beauty. Okay, this was just my personal theory, but I’d be pretty pleased if I was right.

“Speak up. What is your name?”

“Nice to meet you, soldier. My name is Satou. I’m a traveling peddler.”

“Rather empty-handed for a peddler, are you not?”

I guess the flat bag slung over my shoulder wasn’t enough for her. It was something I’d found in my spoils—the bottomless bag of holding standard to any tabletop RPG. In this world, it was called a Garage Bag.

I didn’t really need it, since I had Storage, but the small black leather satchel made for a stylish fashion accessory. Was it unusual for a merchant to carry his goods in a bag like this?

“I’m embarrassed to say that my packhorse ran away from me yesterday after being startled by the meteorites.”

“Meteorites? Ah, you mean yesterday’s starfall.”

I figured that the Meteor Showers I’d cast yesterday had probably been visible from a distance, so it made sense to use that as my excuse. The fact that they were already calling it a “starfall” was typical fantasy writing.

> Skill Acquired: “Fabrication”

> Skill Acquired: “Making Excuses”

Okay, I knew I made that up on the fly just now, but those skill names were a little uncalled for. Although, that being said, they looked kind of useful, so I decided to throw a few points into each anyway.

“There’s a hole in your story. If you were traveling along the highway, your horse would’ve run in the opposite direction.”

It was really too bad that I couldn’t see the woman’s face. I had no doubt she was wearing a decidedly sadistic expression.

I felt strangely calm, considering I was being interrogated at swordpoint, but that was probably because the menu icons and radar in my field of vision were detracting from my sense of reality. I couldn’t shake the feeling that this was just a game and there was no need for concern.

Maybe because I’d enabled the “Fabrication” skill, all kinds of suitable excuses came to mind. “I beg your pardon, but do you know of a place called the Soldiers’ Stronghold?”

“Yes, of course. It’s where people go who wish to die.”

Was it a popular suicide spot, or what? But I was glad it wasn’t a restricted area.

“I was told the grave of one of my grandfather’s benefactors is there, so I was on my way to visit it when I saw the starfall. When my horse ran off, I panicked and chased after it, but of course I couldn’t catch up…”

“I see. How very unfortunate.”

Oh? Did she believe me? Leave it to my maxed-out “Fabrication” and “Making Excuses” skills, I guess—they were super effective.

“Do you have your identification papers?”

Identification papers? I had my driver’s license in my wallet, but I was pretty sure showing that would only cause more problems.

“Unfortunately, they were hidden in my packhorse’s mantle, so I don’t have them on hand.”

“Well then, you can have them reissued in Seiryuu City.” With that, she slid her large sword back into the scabbard on her back and fastened it in place.

“Hey, Iona, you’re really gonna believe him just like that? What if he’s a thief?”

“He has very prim fingers, not to mention that expensive magic robe. Most likely, he’s a noble from some small country in the north.”

“He might be a *spy*, then!”

“I doubt they would employ someone who’s clearly not from our kingdom as a spy, don’t you think?” The young woman who’d come down from the rock was whispering urgently to the heavily armored soldier. Thanks to my “Keen Hearing” skill, I could hear everything.

“What’s the matter, Lilio? I thought the younger ones with black hair were your type.”

“…They’re my least favorite now, due to personal reasons.”

“Ahh, he dumped you, huh? Want me to treat you sometime to some food that’ll make your chest bigger?”

“He didn’t dump me because of my chest! But I won’t say no to a free meal. You can listen to my troubles while you’re at it, too.”

Having more or less persuaded them to calm down, Zena left the two to their girl talk and came over to apologize for her colleagues’ rudeness.

Together with the other women, we headed toward the troop headquarters. Their encampment was right next to the highway, so I didn’t have much choice but to follow along. Besides, it probably would have seemed suspicious if I had tried to take my leave there and wander off into the forest or something.

The battlefield smelled so strongly of blood that I felt like I might throw up. Luckily, it didn’t actually happen—thanks to my resistance skills, maybe. There were a few bodies covered by cloth and several more casualties receiving emergency first aid, plus the enormous corpse of the wyvern.

…So people had died in that battle?

Strangely, I didn’t really see any soldiers crying. Maybe they were throwing themselves into their work to stave off any feelings of sadness.

The men I had assumed to be military engineers of some kind were working away with what looked like saws to dismantle the wyvern’s corpse. It was

probably difficult to satisfactorily drain all the blood out of a body that large, which explained why the workers were splattered with red.

Spotting Zena, now in the care of some guards, the mounted knight who seemed to be the commander trotted over on horseback. I had never seen a horse up close like this before. Its breath stank as it snorted wildly through its nose.

Stop moving your face toward me with those cutesy eyes. That's okay only when pretty women do it, got it?

"Zena! You're all right!"

"Yes, thanks to this person here. This is Satou, a very agile peddler." Zena's introduction seemed to include some unnecessary details, but I bit back any sharp remarks.

"Then we're in your debt. It would be terrible if we'd lost a precious magic soldier."

That made it sound like losing her wouldn't have been a big deal if she wasn't a magic soldier, but judging by the grins of the people around us, it was probably just a joke.

The armored woman who'd interrogated me earlier whispered into the captain's ear, explaining what I had told her before, and they asked me what I'd seen at the Soldiers' Stronghold.

Apparently, the group had been sent out from Seiryuu City the day before as a survey team to determine whether the "starfall" had caused anything strange.

Seiryuu City

Satou here. There's something exhilarating about talking to a woman, isn't there? Ever since my girlfriend dumped me, I've been investing a little too much money in a shop that I frequent with Mr. Tubs where you can pay to have pretty girls drink with you.

All the incapacitated soldiers, including Zena, were loaded onto a wagon to be brought back to Seiryuu City. Thanks to her intervention, I was able to join them as well.

Aside from Zena and me, the city-bound wagon also carried the heavily armored soldier named Iona—who, when she took off her armor, was even more attractive than I'd imagined—and five or so other young soldiers.

The young woman named Lilio and the other female bodyguard stayed behind with the rest of the troops. Apparently, they were going to wait for more carts to pick up the bodies of fallen soldiers and the wyvern, then return to their scheduled patrol.

The severely injured had already gone ahead, so no one riding with us had any life-threatening injuries. The coachman was a civilian manservant.

Man, I was glad they didn't ask me to drive this thing.

The wagon was moving slowly out of consideration for the wounded soldiers, but that meant you could jog just as fast. The city was about ten miles away, but it would probably take three or four hours to get there.

A few carts carrying the fallen soldiers and the remains of the wyvern passed by us. "Do they use the wyvern carcass for something?" I asked.

"Yes, they do. They process the hide to make cloaks and leather armor and such, which apparently sell at a high price, since they're so sturdy. Some traders even buy the fangs and bones."

“Though now if there’s meat in the army’s rations, one can’t help but suspect it’s wyvern.”

“Doesn’t taste good?” I asked.

In response, the two soldiers only looked at each other and exchanged wry smiles.

The man driving the wagon replied in their place. “It’s disgusting. Almost as bad as rats! It’s tough as wolf tendons and smells like a striped raccoon dog. Anyone who’s eaten it once ain’t gonna give it a second try, that’s for sure!”

“Is it really that bad, sir?”

“There’s no need to call a manservant like me ‘sir,’ young’un. But I hear that awful stuff is a right feast for west quarter dwellers and slaves. When the butcher gets a wyvern carcass, it’s like a festival outside the shop.”

Slaves? There was a slavery system here?

Nobody was going to try to enslave me or anything once we got to the city, right? A bit concerned, I took a look at the map as the conversation continued.

Seiryuu City’s population was about 80 percent citizens and 20 percent slaves. Only a small fraction of the citizens were wealthy people like nobles and merchants or priests and priestesses. But the first thing I noticed as I looked at the map was that the inhabitants weren’t all humans.

Ordinary humans, who were referred to as “humanfolk,” made up about 90 percent of the population. The other 10 percent were fairyfolk, like dwarves and gnomes, and beastfolk, like cat-and dog-people. I always thought elves were the quintessential fantasy race, but surprisingly, there was only one elf here.

I saw a lot of races I’d never heard of, too—rare sorts like white-wing folk and leopard-people. I was surprised to find lizardfolk among them, too. Wasn’t that the same kind of creature that attacked me yesterday?

I’d assumed all these races coexisted peacefully, like in that Western game series *Airrim*, but aside from the fairyfolk, it looked like most of the demi-humans in the city were slaves.

There was even one individual called a “hell demon” living there. Overall, it

seemed like a pretty diverse country.

“Look, you can see the city now!”

“Wow, is that the outer wall?”

“Yes! It’s so solid, we don’t even worry about wyvern attacks!”

The wall was certainly impressive. It looked like it encircled the entire city—so maybe it was more apt to call the place a fortress city.

Made up of enormous stones, the city wall seemed at least a hundred feet tall, judging by the nearby trees. According to the information on the map, it was about ten feet thick, too, with passageways inside. There were towers around one hundred and fifty feet tall, where I could see soldiers positioned as sentries.

“Do you know anyone in Seiryuu City, Satou?” Zena asked, probably bringing it up because we were now in sight of the city.

“Oh, no, unfortunately. I was planning to just find an inn for now.”

“In that case, I suggest the Gatefront Inn,” Iona said. “It’s a bit expensive, since it’s right by the city’s main gate, but it’s famous for its cleanliness and good food.”

“That sounds great.” Cleanliness was definitely a must. Back in college, I’d traveled abroad on the cheap, staying in hostels, and I didn’t want any more bugs for roommates. Besides, trying new food was always one of the best parts of traveling. I’d bet anything there would be rye bread and salt-rich soups and other fantasy cuisine.

That being said, as I was talking with Zena and Iona, a pair of male soldiers with relatively minor-looking injuries were boring holes into me with their eyes. They didn’t come over—maybe the jolting of the wagon had irritated their bone fractures—but I still would have preferred that they give it a rest with the openly jealous glares.

If looks could kill, I’m pretty sure I would’ve been dead two or three times over.

“Well then, Satou, please do stay at the Gatefront Inn. I want to come and thank you later.”

“Oh, there’s no need for all that.”

“Yes, there is! I swear on the Marienteil family name that I will find a way to thank you!”

…She’d seemed like such a refined girl at first, but Zena was actually pretty intense. Even desperate, perhaps. If I were around her age, I’d definitely be getting the wrong idea about her feelings toward me here.

Feeling a bit guilty about the injured soldiers, I promised to stay at the Gatefront Inn and parted ways with her at the entrance to the city.

“Over here, please, Satou,” Iona called, leading me toward a guard station adjoined to the main gate. “Is the knight Sir Thorne here, by chance?” she asked a young sentry outside the station. The young man seemed flustered at being addressed by such a beautiful woman, and his face burned bright red as he called inside loudly for the knight in question.

Iona thanked the sentry with an even expression and walked inside the station as comfortably as if it was the front door to her own home. I followed timidly behind her, like a duckling sticking close to its mother.

It was a bit gloomy inside; there was only one tiny window for light.

“It’s been a while, Sir Thorne.”

“Oh, if it isn’t little Miss Iona! Is your old man still obsessed with his roses?”

“You know I hate it when you say things like that, Thorne.”

Clearly, this was an acquaintance of Iona’s. At almost six and a half feet tall, the enormous Sir Thorne could have been a half-giant.

“Oh-ho! A younger man, eh? Nice clothes, but he’s kinda scrawny. You’ll have to put some meat on those bones if you want to be strong enough to protect our Iona!”

Oh geez, it’s not like that at all! But I was in no place to reply with a huge hand smacking me on the back. I mean, sure, Iona *was* beautiful, and I’d be lying if I said I didn’t find her attractive, but I don’t do well with the strong, calculating types. Besides, she’d never give me the time of day even if I tried, so my opinion was irrelevant from the get-go.

“You misunderstand. This young man gave Zena some help earlier. He seems to

have lost his identification papers, so I'd like you to reissue them."

"Ah, with the Yamato stone?"

"Yes, if you wouldn't mind."

I wish they'd stop using keywords I don't understand. The room Sir Thorne led me to contained what looked like a twenty-inch LCD.

"Right this way, sonny!" Thorne beckoned from behind the slate, and I went over to stand beside him. "Just to be sure, you're not a wanted criminal or a thief, are you?"

"No, of course not." I'm just an ordinary guy, no crimes here.

"All right, put your hands on top of the Yamato stone and tell it your name."

Was this a magical tool for checking someone's criminal record? I did as I was told and put my palms down on the slate. Still, where did the name "Yamato" come from? Outer space?

My name… Ichirou Suzuki? No, I had better say my character's name.

"Satou."

That seemed to be the right choice. A faint white light shone from the slate, and words started to appear. I had never seen this alphabet before, but I was able to read it with my "Shigan Language" skill.

Crap, is it going to show my status screen? If they find out I'm level 310, it might cause an uproar… Wait, huh? That's odd.

"You can take your hands off now, son."

The information shown was very different from my own status screen.

Race: human

Age: fifteen

Level: 1

Affiliation: none

Job: none

Class: commoner

Title: none

Skills: none

Bounty: none

This was more like my stats from before I'd leveled up. An idea occurred to me, and I opened up the "networking info" screen from the menu. I was right: The information on this screen was what the Yamato stone had displayed.

In the original game, that screen had just been for writing a profile that other users could see with tags, but this version was much more detailed. And you could probably change the contents manually, since each item had a drop-down box with the original value as the upper limit. You could even set your name, title, and skill to "none."

I could understand having no title or skill, but what was the point of making your name "none"? Telling everyone you didn't want to socialize, maybe?

"Hmm! So you've come of age, have you? I thought you were younger. You must still live a sheltered life to be level one as an adult."

Huh? He didn't think I was an adult? Oh, right… I'd noticed earlier that I looked like I did when I started high school, hadn't I?

So fifteen was the age of majority in this country. I checked the information on the map with a perfunctory reply to the knight. Sure enough, most people who were level 1 were under the age of ten. When I looked up fifteen-year-olds, most were around level 3. So was everyone going to assume I had the life experience of a ten-year-old?

As my mind wandered, Sir Thorne was using a quill pen to fill out a form with the information from the Yamato stone with surprisingly delicate handwriting. Finally, he wrote, Verified by: Seiryuu County Vassal Sir Thorne at the bottom and stamped a seal above my name.

"Don't lose it this time, got it? The reissuing fee is one silver."

The certificate was issued on what looked like Japanese paper. I was a little disappointed that it wasn't on parchment, to be honest. Accepting the paper from him, I reached into my pocket and pulled one Shigan silver coin out of

Storage. I had at least one hundred of every kind of coin in the Shigan currency, so change shouldn't be a problem.

"What, so you keep your money in your pockets? At least you're cautious about that. Make sure you keep your ID there from now on, too!" Thorne turned toward Iona. "And the city tax?" he asked. Was there a tax just for entering the city?

Apparently, the fee was normally one large copper for commoners, but according to Iona, they were going to waive the tax as thanks for saving Zena.

"Take this, too. It's your visa token. It's good for ten days. If you want to stay longer, come back to this station or to the town hall in the central ward and apply for an extension. They'll take care of the process at either place for three copper coins."

The object he gave me was a wooden tag with some information branded into it: a few numbers and the crest that I'd also seen over the main gate. The numbers seemed to indicate the length of my stay; of course, they were unfamiliar symbols, not any numerals I knew. One character seemed to symbolize one number, so it was probably safe to assume they worked the same way as Arabic numerals.

"If it expires and you don't apply for an extension, the guards can fine you a silver. And if you can't pay that, you might end up as a slave, so be careful." Sir Thorne's warning sounded well practiced. I figured I'd better not forget it.

Still, getting sentenced to slavery over an expired visa? That's pretty harsh! It reminded me of the headhunters picking up homeless people in the Edo period in Japan.

I put my visa token and ID papers into my Garage Bag. Naturally, once they were safely out of sight, I stowed them away in Storage.

"Thank you very much."

"Think nothing of it, my boy. If you have any problems, go see the general merchant next to the guard station for advice. It won't be free, but he'll do you right."

With my business taken care of, I thanked the pair courteously and made to

leave the station.

“Satou, I’m terribly sorry, but I have further business with Sir Thorne, so this is where we part ways. That building there with the yellow signboard is the inn we talked about, so I doubt you’ll get lost on the way.”

I looked in the direction Iona was pointing. Naturally, I was searching for a large billboard like you’d see in Japan, but I couldn’t find anything of the sort. Upon closer inspection, though, I saw a tiny wooden plank hanging from the doorway of a building that just looked like a house. Was that the “signboard”?

I thanked Iona and headed toward the inn. I could hear her talking with Thorne inside the station as I walked away, but since it didn’t seem to have anything to do with me, I didn’t bother listening in.

A City Stroll

Satou here. Back in college, whenever I'd saved up enough money from my part-time job, I'd go on trips with my group of friends or my girlfriend. When you go abroad once in a while, you really start to appreciate Japan's good points. I've never been anywhere with better service or cleanliness than Japan.

With a big stretch, I took in all the exotic sights and sounds of the street.

I hadn't really noticed before, since I'd been taken straight to the guard station, but there was a semicircle of open space between the gate and the street with a radius of about sixty feet. I wasn't sure if this clearing was to keep the bustle of traffic going in and out of the main gate from interfering with the rest of the town or more for military purposes.

The city was made largely of stone, like the kind you'd see in a movie or a Western game. Even the passersby looked like designs I'd seen in game docs: men in tunics, women in old-fashioned dresses.

It seemed like there was a large wealth gap here, too; I saw quite a few people wearing patchwork dresses or stained shirts and ripped trousers.

Next, I turned my attention to the buildings. From where I was standing, most of them seemed to be two-story stone buildings. I did see some that looked like wood or brick, though.

A tower peeked out beyond the roofs of the houses with a windmill attached to its pointed steeple; maybe it was a flour mill or something? All my knowledge about this stuff came from games and novels, so I wasn't sure. I planned to stay here in the city for a while, so I'd check it out later.

The street stretched out before me, continuing straight to the inner wall that I could just barely make out in the distance. The road itself was about twenty feet across. On the other side of the inner wall was what looked like a lord's keep.

Clearly, Seiryuu City was a bigger fortress city than I'd thought.

It was an incredible sight! As a game programmer, there was no way I could not get excited about a fantasy scene like this.

But was this spectacle really all part of a dream? I couldn't shake the doubt from my mind. I certainly didn't have the design sense to come up with such a realistic cityscape. Anything my mind would conceive would probably have a cheaper look, with vague details.

If this really is a dream, it must be somebody else's.

And if so, whoever's dreaming this definitely likes games. I hope they don't do anything to mess with my sanity stat—

My thoughts were abruptly cut off when something soft and warm suddenly assaulted my arm.

"Hey, you there! You just came from the front gate, right? Right?! Instead of looking around with your mouth hanging open, you should come over to our inn if you haven't chosen one yet! I'll throw in a free meal or something!"

"Wh-what…?"

"Don't worry about it! I can't say we're cheaper than the competition, but we've got clean beds and tasty food that's made with love!"

Hastily closing the map screen, I was greeted by the reddish-brown eyes of a very cute girl. A thin ribbon tied her tawny-brown hair into a side ponytail. She was too close for me to see her outfit very well, but she looked to be around middle school age; the AR display confirmed that she was thirteen, although the disproportionately ample chest pushing into me suggested otherwise.

Still hanging onto my arm, the enthusiastic girl dragged me along. Maybe she was a barker or tout for attracting customers—something you rarely saw in Japan these days outside of school festivals.

At any rate, before I knew it, she was dragging me into some kind of barroom. It seemed a little dark, although that might have been because we'd just entered from the bright street. A glance at the sign above the door told me this was the very place I'd been heading for—the Gatefront Inn.

“Mom! Mommm! I got us a guest!”

“Goodness, you’re so pushy! You shouldn’t harass people like that.” A well-built older woman emerged from the kitchen, scolding the young lady as she came up to the counter.

Considering the soft warmth my arm had been treated to, I had no complaints about the aggressive advertising. Yep, it was worth it all right!

The older woman at the counter had a lovely face, even if her figure had a rather large presence. She might be around thirty or so…? In that case, it was probably rude to call her an older woman, then. Let’s call her the landlady instead.

An AR display popped up beside the landlady’s face when I looked at her. This dream just kept using game mechanics. The info screen that appeared was similar to the one I’d seen on the Yamato stone earlier, but the fields were a little different. This one seemed to show more specific information.

It made sense that this woman was the mother of the lovely young girl, given her beautiful face, but why did she have to be so chubby? A few pounds less, and she’d be exactly my type. *I mean, I guess she’s already out, since she’s married. Adultery never ends well, so no thank you!*

“Hmm? Are you planning to spend the night? You don’t have any bags…”

“My packhorse got startled by the starfall the other day and ran off… Luckily, I still had my coin purse, so I managed to make it to town.”

“Oh, that must have been rough! Well, we charge one large copper per night or a small copper for the large communal room. If you eat your meals at the bar, we’ll throw in a dish for free as a special deal for overnight customers.”

Hmm. I don’t know the standard cost for inns here, but if I want to figure out the exchange rate between large coppers and silvers, I should try paying for ten days in advance. The landlady seemed like she’d be pretty good at math, so I doubted she’d mess up the calculation.

“Well then, I’ll pay for ten days’ stay, please.”

“Certainly! That’ll be two silvers, then.”

I pulled two silver coins out of my pocket and handed them to the landlady. So five large coppers made one silver. If that wasn't right, she probably would've mentioned knocking off an extra copper as a favor or something.

Now that I'd secured a place at the inn, I definitely wanted something to eat. All I'd had the day before was a protein bar, so I was getting pretty hungry.

"Ma'am, would I be able to take my meal now? I'd like to eat something simple if I can…"

"Well, if you want hot food, you're either a few hours too early or too late. The kitchen fire's died out for the moment, but I do have a premade quiche I can fix up for you, if you'd like."

A quiche, huh? I hadn't had that since I ate at a diner last month. Considering the town's European-fantasy setting, I'd been expecting something more like rye bread or salty soup, but I guess I'd assumed too much.

"I'll take that, then, please."

"Certainly. Please have a seat; it'll be right out. Martha, could you take our guest's information for the register?"

The landlady returned to the kitchen, and Martha appeared in her place, pitter-pattering up to me with a string-bound logbook like a clerk in a period piece.

Martha's outfit, which I hadn't been able to get a look at before, consisted of a white blouse, a light-orange skirt, and a brown corset-style vest. Her shoes were made of leather and looked like soft hallway slippers.

"Yes, ma'am! Sir, if you could give me your name, please!"

"Satou."

"Mr. Satou… Got it. Now your age and occupation, please!"

I had to stop myself from saying I was a twenty-nine-year-old programmer. My status screen said I was fifteen, and so should the ID papers I got earlier, so… "I'm a peddler, fifteen years old."

"Whoa, you're older than me?! I figured we were around the same age!" Despite her surprise, Martha swiftly took down my info on the straw paper of

the logbook.

Apparently, I didn't need to show my ID for inn registry. Right as Martha finished writing everything down, ready to start some kind of idle conversation, the landlady reappeared from the kitchen with a plate of food.

"Thanks for waiting! The side dish is on the house."

Maybe it was just my imagination, but the landlady seemed to make a point of obstructing my view of Martha as she put down my food on the table.

Two slices of quiche sat on the plate, along with a small bowl of what looked like pickled bok choy. The slices were generous, and there was a wooden fork to eat them with.

The lone copper piece I paid for the meal felt like a cheap ten-yen coin.

Now then, it was time to dig in to my first full meal in over a day. I took a bite slowly, savoring the taste. The quiche was dense and heavy, made with plenty of potatoes. The other ingredients consisted of spinachlike leafy greens, mushrooms, and…red onions maybe?

Even though it was cold, it was tastier than I'd expected. I did think it could've used a bit more jerky, but it would be wrong to complain about a meal prepared especially for me outside of the usual kitchen hours.

"Mom's quiches are even better when they're fresh from the oven!"

"Martha! You haven't cleaned up after those cowardly merchants who left this morning, have you?"

"Oh, sorry, not yet!"

"Then what are you lollygagging around for?"

"All right, all right, I'm going. See you later, Mr. Satou!" Martha headed upstairs to do her cleaning.

"What did you mean by 'cowardly merchants'?"

"Ahh, well… After these guests witnessed yesterday's starfall, they were in a tizzy all night, going on about 'a demon lord picking a fight with the dragons of the valley!' They left first thing this morning."

She lost business because of me… That was a pretty bad thing I did.

Wait. More important, there was a word in there I don't like the sound of…

"There's a 'demon lord' around here?"

"Well, there was. Though the destined hero defeated the last one sixty or seventy years ago. And I haven't heard anything about one being resurrected anywhere."

So there was a "demon lord"…and a "hero." Good thing that was taken care of. If this was a game, progressing through events as the protagonist would definitely end up with the demon lord getting resurrected. It was probably best not to stick my nose into it, poking around for more information.

"Besides, in the six hundred years since the Shiga Kingdom was founded, no one has ever seen a demon lord in Seiryuu City or the neighboring counties. Even if it did attack, it'd start with Labyrinth City, I'm sure. And that's on the opposite side of the kingdom, so we have no cause for worry."

If this was a game, I feel like this conversation would definitely raise an event flag for an attack.

"Around here, we're far more worried about wyverns. They can swoop down and carry away young farmhands, packhorses, even children. Our army is strong, so Seiryuu City is safe… But outside the city walls, people working in the fields are in constant fear of an attack."

Those things are scarier than I thought.

"But the dragons don't attack people?"

"Haven't you heard the legends? Dragons are lethargic and lazy. They sleep in the Valley of Dragons and seldom come out. The last time one appeared was two years ago, and the time before that was before I was born!

"It was terrible, apparently. They say a black dragon attacked and ate all the goats and sheep…"

She mentioned only livestock, so did that mean there weren't that many human casualties? I wanted to talk about it a little more, but the landlady returned to the kitchen.

Before finishing off the quiche, I decided to try the side dish. The pickled stuff in the bowl turned out to be cabbage, not bok choy. I had mistaken it because of the whitish color, but the taste reminded me of the sauerkraut I had tried in a shop specializing in German beer.

The topping sprinkled over it was a finely chopped herb, maybe something like parsley. Returning from her cleaning, Martha informed me that if I mixed it into the cabbage before eating it, it would cut the sourness.

Wait, was she done cleaning already? It hadn't even been ten minutes!

But since she was just sitting around while I ate, I asked her if she knew any shops where I could buy some everyday supplies. I could have just checked my map, but I thought it was important to communicate with the locals.

"Huh? Supplies? There are street stalls in the east quarter, so you could probably buy them there. But as long as it's nothing too complicated, we can have our maid buy them for you!"

"Thank you, but I'd like to get a change of clothes and underwear and things like that, so I think I'd better go myself." It was tempting to let them treat me like a celebrity, but I was a bit reluctant to have a stranger buying me underwear.

"Hmm… I know there are stalls on East Street that sell secondhand clothes…"

"Secondhand? I don't know…"

"If you want new stuff, your best bet is to get it tailor-made on Center Street, but that'll be pricey!"

"Is there anywhere that sells new clothes that're manufactured instead of tailor-made?"

"What's 'manufactured'…? Oh, you mean like premade clothes? You use some big words for someone so young. They sell those on Teputa Avenue, but they're still pretty expensive."

Teputa Avenue, huh? I opened the map to search for it. It looked a little far from the inn. For now, I marked it on the map with a pin.

"Thank you. I'll take a stroll around the street stalls and Teputa Avenue, then."

"Oh, I know! How about I show you around? I can, can't I, Mom? Especially

since there aren't a lot of customers today!"

Oh, that would be nice. Shopping with a local as my guide sounded exciting. Martha got permission from her mother, on the condition that she'd be back in time to help prepare for dinner.

Still, guest or not, I found it odd that she'd so easily let her daughter go out on the town with a man she didn't know. Where was her sense of danger? Wait… Maybe she had assessed (correctly) that I wouldn't hurt a fly. Yeah, that was probably it.

Even back in high school, a girl I was close to was always telling me what a good person I am… Okay, no—let's not go dredging up traumatic memories.

Martha brought me to a section of East Street that was lined with all kinds of street stalls for about a third of a mile. Each stall had a space of only about twenty square feet. Maybe it was my imagination, but I could swear there was a faint scent of soy sauce in the air.

"A lot of these stalls are closed…"

"Oh, that's because food vendors and farmers from the villages nearby usually do business here. They generally close around noon. Come evening, a lot of the food carts set up in the plaza instead."

Most of the clothing vendors were about midway down the street, so we headed in that direction, idly browsing the other stalls as we went.

Some of the ones selling foodstuffs were still open, it turned out. Standing beside Martha as she admired some carved wooden accessories, I listened with great interest to a conversation between the proprietor of the stall next door and an older woman shopping there.

"How much for three of these gabo fruits?"

"Three of 'em would be two penny coins."

"What? *Two* pennies? Surely one's enough."

"At that price you'd be bleedin' me dry, ma'am! How about four for two?"

"Five for two!"

“Oh, all right. That’ll do. Only because you’re so pretty, y’hear?”

So haggling is standard here, huh? Man, I’m used to buying things for whatever the price tag says… That’s kind of a pain.

Incidentally, a “gabo fruit” appeared to be a root crop not unlike a red, fist-size pumpkin.

I was drawn to the unusual term *penny coin*, so I took one out of Storage to have a look. It was a square brass coin that weighed only a fraction of an ounce, though mine was rusted over.

Martha held a small hair ornament shaped like a water bird up to her hair and turned to me. “What do you think? Does it suit me?”

“Yeah, it looks great.”

“Which one do you think looks better?”

Heh-heh-heh… I knew she’d ask that!

I’d learned all too well in college how to deal with this. You can’t just blurt your honest opinion. You have to figure out which one she’s already leaning toward, based on her initial reactions, and go with that one. Otherwise, the process will just get dragged out even more.

“The light-blue one, I think. It goes great with your hair color.”

“You think so, too?”

“I’ll sell that one to ya for three copper coins,” the shopkeeper announced quickly, sensing that he might have a customer.

“I’m sorry; I don’t have enough pocket money today… I’ll try to come and buy it at the next harvest festival.”

Huh? I’d expected her to try to hint that I should buy it for her, but I guess she’s too modest for that. Thanks to extensive experience with my college girlfriend, I was already prepared to pay for it. I also wanted to give haggling a try, so I decided to get it for her as thanks for guiding me through the city.

“Any chance you’d take one copper?”

“If I did, I’d barely break even! Make it two coppers, at least.”

As I started to negotiate, Martha tugged on my sleeve, seeming worried that I was spending money on her. “Wait, you don’t have to—” But I waved her off.

From what I’d seen so far, I was fairly certain that five pennies made one copper, and four coppers made one large copper.

“How about one copper and two pennies?”

“Make it a copper and four.”

“A copper and three?”

“All right. Sold.”

I pulled the right amount from my pocket and paid the man. He handed me the hair ornament, and I affixed it to Martha’s hair for her. It felt like going around to stalls at a festival with a younger cousin or something.

> Skill Acquired: “Haggling”

> Skill Acquired: “Estimation”

> Skill Acquired: “Negotiation”

For my success in bargaining, I was rewarded with several new skills. They seemed useful, so I enhanced all three with some skill points.

“Hee-hee… Thank you, Mr. Satou!”

“Not at all! It’s my way of thanking you for showing me around.” I replied to Martha’s shy thanks as noncommittally as possible. If I wanted to flirt with her, I’d go on to add a few compliments or something, but again, she’s a little girl and I’m not a creep, so I left it at that.

Since I had activated the “Estimation” skill, looking at a product would now allow me to see the cost displayed in an AR box beside it, in the form of white text showing a range like **2~4 copper coins**. That was probably the estimated price range.

Anyway, there were an awful lot of children working around here.

“What’s wrong, Mr. Satou?”

“Oh, I was just thinking about how many kids there are…”

“They’re mostly servants and maids who get paid in tips.”

“Really? Wow, that’s quite the work ethic for being so young.”

“Huh? It’s normal.” Martha seemed genuinely confused by how impressed I was. I guess the standard age of employment was really low here.

Ooh! That must be—!

Peeking out through a gap in all the hustle and bustle of the marketplace was a pair of lightly twitching cat ears.

Beastfolk! It had to be! It seemed like they mostly lived in the west quarter, so I hadn’t seen one in person yet.

Unfortunately, a sudden shout put a damper on my excitement.

“Dirty little animals! Whaddaya think yer doin’ in the east quarter?!”

A blond young man in a tunic aimed a kick at a little dog-girl struggling under a heavy burden, and her bundle of firewood clattered to the ground as she fell. Her ears flattened in fear as she looked up at the man who’d kicked her. The cat-girl with her came running over immediately, bowing and apologizing fervently to him.

I couldn’t stand by and watch this.

“Do you have a problem with these girls?” In an uncharacteristic move, I butted in before processing what I was doing.

“Huh?! Are these your slaves? Get some leashes on ’em and put ’em back in the west quarter!”

To be honest, I didn’t have much of a plan, but luckily, the other guy quickly retreated. I gathered up the dog-girl’s scattered sticks.

“Th-the firewood…”

“P-please…g-give…”

The two little girls looked up at me from the ground. Did they think I was going to take away their firewood? The dog-girl was stammering so badly from fear, she couldn’t finish her request for me to give it back. I took a piece of string out of my bag and tied up the sticks as they’d been before, then handed them back.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes.”

“We’re…fine.”

“Oh, good. There are a lot of people on the main street, so be careful.”

The two thanked me profusely as they left. When I turned back, Martha was giving me a strange look.

“What is it?”

“You were so kind to those beastfolk…”

Hmm? Why not? They’re cute, aren’t they? Sure, they need a wash and a haircut, but I’m sure they’ll grow up to be lovely young women.

“Do people in the city hate them that much?”

“Well, yeah. Apparently, beastfolk used to attack or even kill hunters and villagers coming to sell produce.”

So they’re thought of as thieves and savages, I guess?

“Oh, hey—look over there!” Maybe she was just trying to change the subject, but Martha quickly dragged me over to what had caught her interest. I pushed the beastfolk to the back of my mind and looked where she was pointing. Small animals in cages were up for sale.

The vendor was a man in a fur coat who appeared to be a hunter. Some kind of hatchet hung from his waist.

Come to think of it, I hadn’t seen many people walking around with swords—only guards and young delinquents. All I’d noticed other than that were a few dagger-length blades hanging from some belts. Swords are heavier than they look, so I bet carrying them at your waist would drag down your clothes and give you sore shoulders.

Martha and I both commented on the animals in the cages, but our opinions were at odds.

“They’re pretty cute.”

“They look delicious!”

Embarrassed that she'd prioritized her stomach, Martha cleared her throat, then grabbed my arm and led me to the next stall. *So I guess we're pretending that didn't happen.*

By the time we reached the clothing area, I'd already bought mugs, a comb, soap, and some "tooth-polishing sticks." These were some sort of dried plant stem that you were supposed to gnaw on while rinsing with water in order to clean your teeth; there were no toothbrushes or floss here.

I didn't see anything made of glass, either. The closest I could find were wares made of gems or crystal.

By now I'd gotten the hang of shopping here. Vendors didn't like it if I tried buying something right away at its estimated price, I realized after three stores or so. Instead, I had to start the negotiations at about half the going rate, then arrive at the price I wanted after three or four rounds of haggling. Man, I didn't mind doing that every once in a while, but every single time was a pain.

In the central part of East Street, we saw a crowd of people standing in the plaza.

"Pious men and women of Seiryuu City! The day of the demon lord's resurrection is nigh! You all must have witnessed it. The starfall was surely a portent of terrible things to come! Now is the time to devote yourselves to the temple of the benevolent Zaicuon!"

In the center, a rotund, self-important-looking man of around thirty years old was heatedly addressing the crowd, in garb reminiscent of a Shinto priest. Partway through, when he started going into devotion, the crowd began losing interest and dispersing.

"What's going on?"

"That's the high priest of Zaicuon Temple. He must be desperate because they've been losing followers."

"Oh? Did they do something?"

"No, no. Everyone's leaving because the temple can't do *anything*."

My confusion must have shown on my face, because Martha gave more

details. “See, Zaicuon Temple doesn’t have anyone who can use Holy Magic. If you’re going to make offerings at a temple, you’re better off with, say, Parion or Garleon. At least they can heal you if you’re wounded.”

I see. I guess you had to be practical in a tough world like this. Such an attitude could hardly be called faith, but I guess people would inevitably flock to the religion with real-world benefits.

The fat priest was getting desperate, grabbing a citizen who was trying to walk away. The lower-ranked priests around him tried to stop it, but I didn’t want to get involved, so I ignored them, and we left the plaza.

The garment area had a lot of places to repair or resize clothing, in addition to secondhand shops. I finally found a stall with new clothing amid all the used clothes, so I bought a good amount of underwear there.

While I was at it, I picked out some nice, soft-looking towels. To my mild disappointment, they were really just two pieces of cloth stitched together; still, it was better than having nothing at all, so I bought some in a few different sizes.

Compared to food and lodging, clothing was pretty expensive.

“Look, Mr. Satou! It’s a dragon mask!”

Martha picked up a carved wooden mask from the stall’s display and held it in front of her face. There were also smooth silver masks, white masks, and all sorts of others for sale.

“People wear these at the harvest festival. This silver kind was quite popular last year.”

Huh… I picked up one of the silver masks. It looked to be the type that you attach with string.

“What do you think, lad? That dragon mask is s’posed to bring peace and good health,” prompted the shopkeeper, a woman who seemed to be in her twenties. Her shirt was cut in a very low V-neck, so it was difficult to find a proper place to look; she wasn’t really my type or even all that attractive, but it was still hard to tear my eyes away.

Trying to find something else to look at, my eyes fell on a wig for sale, beside

the silver mask. “Do people wear these with the dragon masks?”

“Well, the only ones who wear dragon masks are the actors who play the dragons. The black wig here is for the actor playing the hero, and this blond one is for other parts, like the princess and her attendants.”

So this festival had a lot of different parts to be played. In the end, I couldn’t resist her recommendation, so I bought the silver dragon mask and the blond wig.

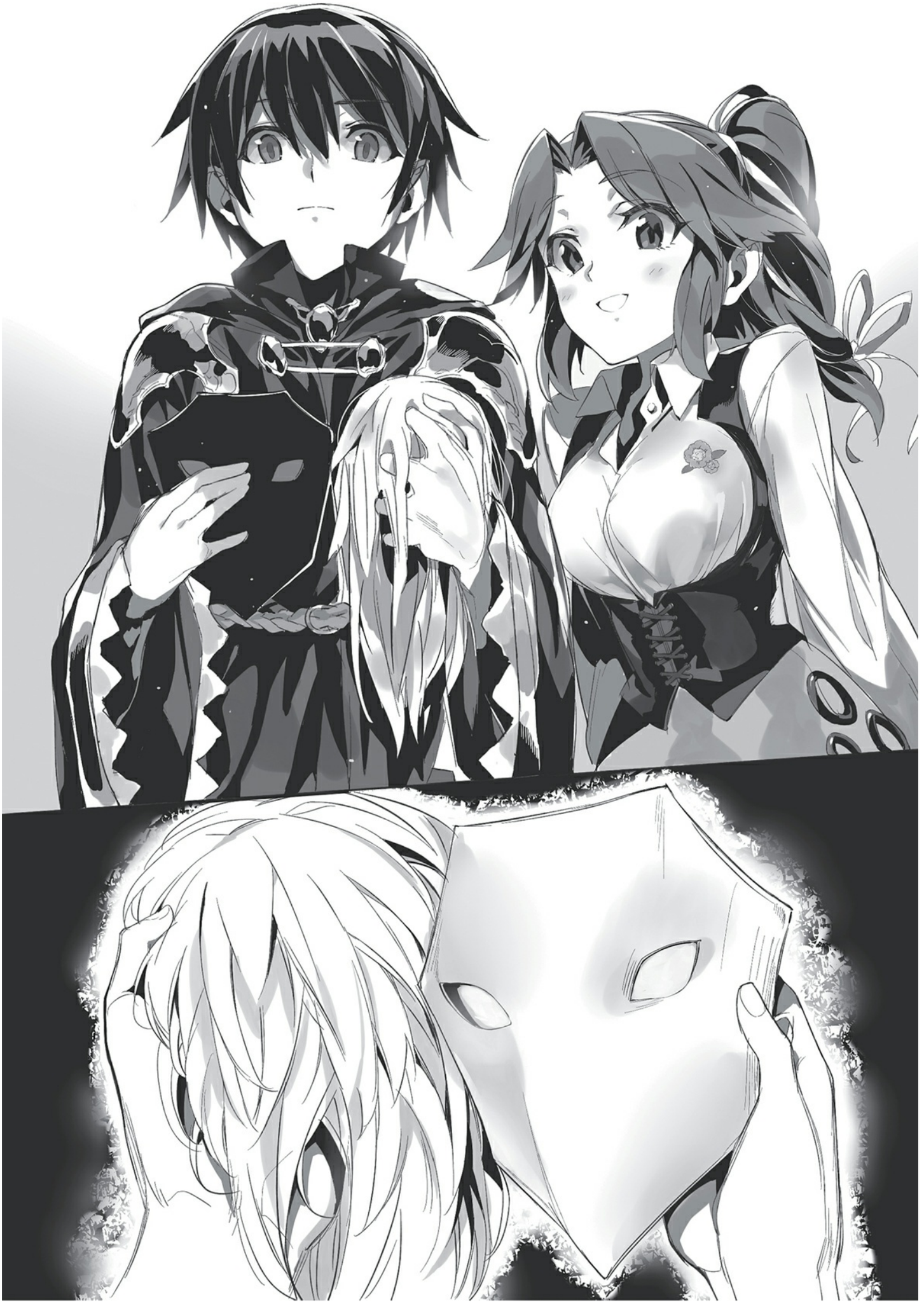
On Teputa Avenue, there were shops selling all kinds of clothing and accessories.

First, I bought a waterproof mantle with a hood for rainy weather at a shop for travelers. I also bought several sets of durable-looking shirts and trousers.

I picked up some footwear, too: a pair of waterproof shoes for travel, some boots that looked like they’d match my robes, and sandals. Most of the sandals they sold were the type that you tie up with cord, ancient Greece–style, but I wanted slip-ons, so I got a cobbler inside the shop to make some to order for me.

While I was waiting for my sandals, I found a bag that looked just like my Garage Bag. Thinking I’d struck gold, I braced myself and checked the market price—but this was just a normal leather bag, much to my disappointment.

Still, it looked like it could serve as a facsimile of my Garage Bag, so I bought it anyway. The color and stitching were a little different, but as long as nobody looked at them side by side, it should serve.



I'd gone a little overboard with my shopping. I wondered if it would be too much to carry. "Excuse me… Is there any way I could ask you to hold on to my purchases for me while I'm shopping?"

"Yes, of course. If you like, we can even have them delivered for you."

"Oh, yes please. I'm staying at the Gatefront Inn, under the name Satou."

Had they offered because I bought so much? What great service.

A boy of about ten, maybe the son of one of the shopkeepers, accepted the bundle of clothes from the clerk and set out to deliver them.

In the next shop, I picked out some clothes to wear downtown. The robe I was in was a top-quality enchanted item, but judging by the clothes for sale and the outfits I'd seen around town, its design seemed a little old-fashioned.

"How about this robe here? It's very dignified."

"It's a little big…"

"What do you think of this doublet, then?"

The two salespeople, both women of about thirty, kept following me around with suggestions that leaned more toward the most expensive items than the ones that would suit me best. I didn't exactly mind that they were pressing just a bit too close to me in a possible attempt to seduce me into buying, but the dizzying intensity of their perfume made the situation half as enjoyable.

"Hey, Mr. Satou, I think this doublet here would look nice, don't you?"

"Oh, it's very nice. The orange lining is a little too much for me, though."

"Don't worry—the color will fade after two or three years."

Two or three years?! I thought incredulously, but maybe that kind of thing was normal in this country. Except for suits and coats, I was used to needing new clothes after every season.

A doublet is basically a tight-fitting, waist-length padded shirt. In Seiryuu City, most doublets had a slash from the elbow to the shoulder where you could see the inner cloth. On others, the slash went down the whole garment.

From what I'd seen in the city so far, this sort of apparel seemed to be a

favorite among flashy young men.

“This color over here is very in this year!”

“Oh yes, I definitely recommend that color!”

Naturally, the saleswomen were pushing a doublet about three times the price of the one Martha had found for me. None of the clothes had labels, so I had to use my “Estimation” skill, but I didn’t doubt that the display was accurate.

Not only did the garment have bizarre decorations on the shoulders, it was a particularly nasty combination of green and pink. I firmly declined.

Yeah, I think I’m pretty much done shopping here. Tuning out the saleswomen as they complained under their breath, we moved on to the next store.

Just two buildings away, we found a shop with a variety of stylish robes. It was basically a menswear store, with lots of tastefully subdued clothing for merchants.

“Wow! It looks expensive, but everything’s so nice!”

“Yes, and the stitching is high quality, too. This looks promising.”

“Thank you very much. Ours may not be quite as remarkable as your Yuriha-fiber robe, sir, but we guarantee the highest quality you’ll find in ready-made clothes.”

The shop manager, a young man, promoted his goods with genuine pride. *I’d have bought it even if he hadn’t pushed, though.*

“If you’d like to have something tailor-made, sir, my parents manage a menswear shop on Center Street. I’m certain they would produce something just to your liking.”

Huh. Both generations were in the same line of work, but they had two different stores? Maybe he was working in a separate location to hone his natural talents.

I bought a plain but stylish robe with silver embroidery and an olive-brown merchant’s robe. Delivery was free here, too. This was starting to remind me of a certain online shopping service.

I had done all the shopping I'd planned for the day, but I was interested in seeing the menswear store the young man recommended, so Martha and I headed that way.

Upon entering the shop, a kindly looking, middle-aged married couple greeted us. Unlike the stores with clothes already made, very little merchandise was on display. Instead, they had samples of five different suits and a wide array of fabrics. A lounge area for discussing business took up the other half of the shop.

"Excuse me, but I'm looking for a heavy merchant's robe. In a subdued color, if possible…"

"Welcome. Please have a seat here, and I'll gather some fabric swatches for you. The five sample suits on the stands over there are our current best-selling designs."

The husband guided me to the lounge and went into the back to gather samples. Just as he left, the wife came in to replace him, carrying some kind of black tea.

Martha sat beside me, uncharacteristically timid as she sipped her tea.

"The weather will be getting colder soon, so I would suggest this thicker cloth. If you're going on a journey, we could also prepare a waterproof overcoat to match your robe, if you'd like."

That sounded pretty good to me. Probably.

I'm the type to buy a bunch of different-colored clothes in bulk from that huge clothing company Uniqlo, so I ordered one of each of the five best-selling designs with matching coats. Apparently, the tailoring would take up to five days.

My order came to eight gold coins in total: pretty expensive, but I had plenty of money, so I paid without batting an eye.

"Wow, Mr. Satou! Merchants sure are rich, huh?"

"A merchant's clothes are like a knight's armor! I can't be cheap about something so important."

Oops. That sounded like an office lady who spends her life going to mixers. In reality, I was thinking that if I wanted to go sightseeing inside the inner wall

where the wealthy people lived, I'd have to be wearing clothes to match, or I'd stand out too much.

Incidentally, the robe I was currently wearing would normally go for about one hundred gold coins. What an insane price! Just like in video games, magic robes here were on an entirely different level of value, I guess.

The clothes would be delivered to my room at the inn when the tailoring was done, but they'd be using temporary stitches. I'd have to come back to the store within a few days to take care of any minute adjustments needed.

The couple waved good-bye as we left.

The streets in this city were a lot cleaner than I'd expect from a European fantasy–style setting.

There was no animal dung to be seen and no homeless people to be found in the alleys. There were even gutters lining shoulders of the road, complete with stone covers.

None of this would be that unusual in a game, but if this were an alternate world instead of a dream, the country's grasp of sanitation was disproportionately advanced compared to the rest of its culture.

Unlike East Street, Center Street had few street stalls and was full of regular shops. Most passersby seemed really well dressed.

On our way back, we walked by a man selling candy on the street, so Martha and I bought some. Instead of being hard candy, it was something called "malt syrup candy"—thin sticks with light-brown syrup stuck to the ends.

Eating it as I walked, I let my eyes roam over the people and all the wagons coming and going along the street. There were a lot of man-and horse-drawn carriages, so I guess magic wasn't convenient enough to entirely replace machinery.

On that note, I also observed that most of the people pulling wagons were wearing collars.

"Are collars in fashion around here?"

"Wha…?" Martha answered around a mouthful of candy. "Oh, no, those are

slaves. The especially rebellious or delinquent ones wear ‘enslavement collars,’ but the collars they’re wearing are probably just to mark them as slaves.”

I see… So that’s how it works…

At that moment, another horse-drawn carriage passed before my eyes. Like the rest, it was moving only about as fast as a brisk walk, probably because this was a crowded street. In the back were ten or so girls with collars—slaves.

Two of them in particular drew my gaze. One girl, with black hair knotted by the long journey and equally black eyes, had features that made her look markedly Japanese. Most of the people I’d seen looked Northern European, so this might have been the first Asian-looking person I’d encountered.

Since the girl’s eyes were downcast, there wasn’t some dramatic moment when our eyes met or anything, but I did make eye contact with the one beside her: a little girl with flowing lilac hair and the traditional Northern European features.

For some reason, she was gazing my way with utter astonishment. *Stop it! Please don’t give me that earnest look. I can’t do anything for you… Also, I’m not into little girls, so…sorry.*

Maybe because I’d been staring at her for so long, the girl’s name and level popped up next to her face.

> Arisa. Level 10.

That’s a high level for such a young girl…

More information appeared beneath her level.

> Eleven years old.

> Title: Witch of the Lost Kingdom

> The Mad Princess

> Skills: Unknown

That was as far as I could read before the cart turned a corner and vanished toward the west quarter.

Those titles definitely spelled trouble… No, I was definitely not getting mixed

up in any of that. Not a chance!

◆

“Welcome home, Ms. Martha!”

When we returned to the Gatefront Inn, a girl who looked like a first or second grader greeted us. At first I thought she might be Martha’s younger sister, but if so, “Ms. Martha” would be an odd thing to call her. Maybe this was the maid I’d been told about earlier.

“Thank you, Yuni! This is Mr. Satou. He’ll be staying with us starting today.”

“Welcome back, Mr. Satou, sir! I brought your packages to your room for you.”

“Ah, thank you! That was probably an awful lot for you, wasn’t it?” I patted little Yuni’s head. Despite her size, she spoke far more formally than Martha.

I wasn’t sure if tipping was customary in this country, but I handed her a penny coin as thanks. Martha remarked, “Good for you, Yuni!” so I figured I had made the right choice.

“Oh, right! Ms. Martha, guess what!”

“What is it?”

“Earlier, I saw a bunch of carts bringing in lots of meat!”

Yuni’s fists were clenched tightly with excitement as she drew closer to Martha, but Martha wrinkled her nose, apparently less than enthused. “Meat? Ugh, don’t tell me it was wyvern?”

“That’s right! The pieces had to be on lots of carts because they were each thiiiis biiiig!” As she said “thiiiis,” Yuni stood on tiptoe and stretched as high as she could to demonstrate the height, and for “biiiig” she flung her hands out sideways for the width.

Okay. This kid is too cute.

The count’s army must have finished breaking down the wyvern carcass and brought it here.

“Why are you so excited about wyvern meat?”

“Because! When the army defeats one, the count donates some of the meat to

the orphanage! Meat! Real meat! How many months has it been, I wonder?" Yuni responded to my question like a child from an old-fashioned movie.

"I hate wyvern meat! It's so gross. And it makes the west quarter stink…"

I guess in a fortified city like this, meat wouldn't come around that often. Martha's and Yuni's reactions were probably evidence of their class differences: One could eat meat regularly while the other could not.

"Anyway, look at this, Yuni! Isn't it cute?" As if the wyvern conversation had never happened, Martha showed Yuni the pin I had bought for her.

"Ooh! Yeah, it's so teeny and pretty!"

As the two of them broke into boisterous chatting, I thought I might return to my room, but first I decided to ask if there was a communal bath in the inn. Considering how clean the rest of the city had been, it didn't seem that strange to expect a bath or a sauna.

"The rich people inside the inner walls have public baths, but they're off-limits to us commoners. Only nobles and people wealthy enough to have houses inside can use them."

Close but no cigar, huh? I couldn't believe you needed social status to get into baths! Damn this feudal society!

"That's too bad. Then what do folks like you do when you want to take a bath, Martha?"

"There's a water well in the rear garden, so we bathe with that. During the winter, we usually bathe only once a trimoon or so, since it's so cold. In midwinter, we try to use hot water so we won't catch a cold, but nobody has the luxury of bathing in hot water in this season."

I guess getting fuel might be a problem in a fortress city like this, too. Checking the map, all I saw nearby was a tiny river, the source of which was undoubtedly underground water.

A trimoon was apparently a period of ten days; months were divided into three parts—the first, second, and third trimoon. They didn't have the term *week* in this language, so a trimoon was the closest equivalent. They didn't seem to have

anything like our names for the days of the week, either.

As I learned more about their society through idle chatter, some new guests arrived. “Hey there, Martha! Do you have a room for us?”

“Welcome! Yes, of course we do!”

The new arrivals looked to be merchants: two men of around forty and one attractive blond woman in her late twenties. Since Martha was caught up in inn business now, I motioned to her that I was returning to my room. Not knowing where it was, I asked Yuni to guide me.

My accommodations were smallish and simple, about seventy-five square feet with a bed, a small personal table, and a chair. I asked Yuni if I was allowed to rinse off here, but she said the inn preferred all bathing to be done outside, lest the rooms get humid or musty.

Made sense, I guess.

All my purchases from the day were laid out on the bed, so I picked out a change of clothes and some bathing supplies and headed back downstairs.

As I left my room, I saw the group from before being led into theirs by Martha. The two men were sharing the same room, while the woman got her own accommodations. So she wasn’t married to either of them, huh?

Following Yuni’s directions, I went out through a wooden door into the rear garden, which was about 130 square feet around. The water well wasn’t far from the door. Rather than a pump, it utilized an old-fashioned bucket system.

Unfortunately, the only thing separating the rear garden from the small adjacent side street was a short little hedge. There wasn’t a lot of traffic, but the occasional person still passed by, and I wasn’t thrilled at the prospect of being on display as I bathed.

Looking around, I noticed a partition screen over by the door. *Oh, so I use this?* I set up the screen to shield my body from the street and started to bathe in the cold well water. The partition was only about as high as my waist, but it would suffice for cover.

I rinsed the dust and grit out of my hair, then washed my body with the soap

I'd bought. It smelled surprisingly nice and felt gentle on the skin (or was that just because I had high stamina?).

I was starting to wish I had some shampoo, but I'd have to make do with soap. It didn't really foam up, but it seemed to clean well enough. I was used to shampoo, so this might have been the first time I'd ever washed my hair with soap.

I heard a creak behind me and turned my head. The back door had opened, and a woman was coming out. It was the female guest from before.

Our eyes met. She gave me a light nod, then began drawing water from the well. Huh? Paying no mind to the fact that there was a nearly naked dude bathing right nearby, she calmly pulled up the rope. It didn't seem like she was disguising her embarrassment, either—she was just totally ignoring me.

When the woman finished pouring water into the washbasin, she set up a partition, took off her clothes, and started bathing.

Huh?

Are you for real? Have you no restraint?!

There was a partition between us, but…but still…!

Every time she moved, something—well, two things, which were presumably D cups—asserted their presence with a distinct jiggle. Of course, she was covering the key areas with her hands, but every once in a while…

No, no, I had to stop! I wasn't some virgin who'd never seen a naked lady before! I forcibly reined in my gaze and went back to my own washing up. *Come on, lower half! Stay calm!*

But when I glanced back at the woman out of the corner of my eye, *she was smirking at me*!

Yep, adult women really are the best!!

…Though, according to the AR, she's a bit younger than me.

She certainly was a sight for sore eyes, but since I was done bathing, it was going to look pretty suspect if I continued hanging around for much longer. I quickly dried myself off with my towel, but… *Where do I throw away the*

bathwater? There aren't any drains or anything, are there?

"You can toss out your water in the shrubbery. I believe there's a drainage system underneath."

The woman solved my dilemma, possibly out of pity for my bizarre behavior. I thanked her, took care of the water, and returned to my room.

You'll have to forgive me for sneaking one last look as I went back inside. A man's instincts are a powerful thing.

When I got back to my room, I changed into the tasteful light-brown robe I'd purchased earlier that day. I'd already changed into new undergarments right after I bathed. It was only at this point when I noticed I'd forgotten to buy socks.

I didn't want my feet to get smelly, so I changed into sandals. Ahh…that was better. I usually wore slippers when working, so wearing shoes for such a long time was getting uncomfortable.

A tantalizing smell wafted up from downstairs, announcing it was dinnertime.

I wanted to go to the bathroom before eating. Instead of having one for each room, the inn had just one common bathroom. The toilet was of the old-fashioned pit-latrine variety. I had never seen one in person, not even at my grandfather's home in the countryside. I guess this was typical fantasy, too, in a way.

Not that I was very happy about it.

After I was through with business, I looked for toilet paper, but of course there was none to be found. I'd gotten my hopes up, since the hotel register had been made with paper, but I guess that was a luxury.

Looking around, I found a bundle of thin straw within arm's length. *Am I supposed to use this?!* I didn't want to chafe my bottom, so I tore off a piece of one of the towels I'd bought and used that. It might be a little wasteful, but now wasn't the time to be thrifty.

This had certainly been a baptism by fire in the ways of this new culture, but all things considered, it was really clean, so I'd be all right using it again.

The barroom on the first floor was enveloped in delicious smells and raucous

chatter.

It was a little dark, but a number of lanterns hung from the ceiling and posts to illuminate the room, which upped the fantasy factor significantly. Very nice!

“Oh, Mr. Satou!” Martha greeted me as she bustled about among tables, carrying trays of food. “I was just wondering if I should go get you.” She motioned me toward an empty seat.

“Thank you. I’ll take whatever you’d recommend for dinner, please.”

“Well, you’re in luck! A huntsman just brought in some wild boar today, so I definitely suggest the wild boar steak. It might be a bit expensive, but it’s well worth the price!”

“Yeah, the boar’s fantastic! You’ll regret it if you don’t give it a try, son!”

It seemed that the meat was responsible for so many customers being there; even the drunks were trying to convince me to order it. They needn’t have bothered, though—my stomach was on board the moment it heard the word *steak*.

“I’ll take the wild boar with some sort of vegetables, then, please.”

“Anything to drink?”

“Tea or fruit juice, or milk if you don’t have those.”

“Huh? All we’ve got is booze and water.”

Right. I guess this is *a bar. Well, I don’t want to mess up my stomach with unboiled water…*

“Then something that’s light and easy to drink, please.”

“Want some hard cider diluted with water, then? Or if you don’t mind spending a little more, watered-down mead or wine would probably taste better.”

Hard cider was basically fermented apple cider, right? Like wine, it could go sour easily if not preserved carefully. But mead was honey-based and a staple of fantasy works besides. Come to think of it, I’d probably never had it before.

“I’ll have mead, then.”

“You got it! Okay, I’ll go put in your order right away. Sit tight!”

Martha headed to the kitchen, nimbly dodging with practiced ease the drunkards who tried to touch her bottom as she passed. Why were there so many pervs here, wanting to grope a middle schooler…?

While I waited for my food, I casually scanned the bar. Men in merchants’ robes and neatly kept tunics were cheerfully picking away at their food and drinking some kind of light-looking beer. Ale maybe?

Something about the patrons seemed off, though.

Hmm… What was it? From a cursory glance, the tavern was indistinguishable from a classic fantasy-movie set.

Oh! It was the tobacco.

There were no ashtrays on the tables, nobody puffing out smoke. Only steam rising from the hot food.

Come to think of it, I hadn’t seen anyone with cigarettes or pipes out shopping, either. Had tobacco not reached this country?

This was perfect for a firm nonsmoker like me, but a chain-smoker like Mr. Tubs would throw in the towel after three days, no doubt about it.

Martha returned with a steaming-hot steak on her tray.

“Thanks for waiting!”

“Wow, that looks delicious.” I wasn’t just being complimentary—it really did look great. This one meal alone was worth the price of three days’ stay at the inn.

On the main plate, a wild boar steak cut into thick cubes was accompanied by white piles that looked like mashed potatoes. Finely chopped basil and fried slices of garlic topped the steak, enhancing the smell of sizzling fat as it piqued my appetite.

Beside the plate was a deep dish filled with soup that was probably consommé. Little cubes of four different kinds of vegetables were at the bottom of the bowl—orange, red, green, and yellow. Judging by the bright colors, I had no doubt they’d taste as good as they looked.

The mead arrived nearly overflowing from a big bisque tankard. Beside it, a basket contained inch-thick slices of rye bread. At last, glorious rye bread—the staple food of all fantasy—would be mine for the eating!

"Eat up before it gets cold!" Martha admonished me before going back to her work, sounding amused at how I was savoring the food with my eyes.

All right, guess I'll start with the vegetable soup. There was a tiny bit of resistance as I sank the large wooden spoon into the soup; clearly it was pretty thick. I scooped some of the fresh vegetables onto the spoon and brought it to my mouth.

Just as I'd expected from its appearance, the soup tasted like consommé. The ingredients had been cooked perfectly—the vegetables broke apart with a single bite, their rich flavors filling my mouth. When I swallowed the thick broth, warmth spread through my stomach. *This must be a really popular dish in the winter.*

Next up was the main course: the steak. I jabbed my fork into a piece and took a bite.

When I'd tried boar before, it had an off-puttingly funky taste, but this meat was different. There wasn't much fat, and it was a tiny bit tough, but once I chewed it a little, my mouth filled with a hearty, rustic flavor that was nothing like beef.

Before the taste left my mouth, I took a bite of the rye bread. It was a little hard, but not as much as I'd been told. Just enough to make a fun crunching sound as I chewed.

It was slightly sour, but when paired with the meat, it mixed with the rich flavor of boar for an absolutely delicious combination. It was so good that I found myself reaching for the next bite before I was even done chewing.

Everything was delicious. I was pleased that this country seemed to have a lot of good food. *It'd be fun to take a gourmet tour of the Shiga Kingdom.*

When I had finished the full pound or so of steak, I remembered my mead and took a big gulp. It was a honeyed yellow alcoholic beverage. I had expected a similar taste and thickness to honey, but since it was diluted and all, it was

smooth and easy to drink. Overall, it wasn't nearly as intense as I'd expected.

As I was licking my lips and savoring the taste of the mead, Martha returned. "Oh my, did you eat it all already?"

"Yeah, it was delicious."

"Well, we still have more, so would you like some bone-in meat or fried cartilage or something like that to go with your drink?"

Hmm… There's still some room left in my stomach, so maybe I'll give it a try.

"That would be great, thanks. Could I have another round of mead, too, please?"

"Sure! Just a minute."

I watched Martha go back to the kitchen and sipped on the last of my mead, surveying the restaurant again. At that moment, my eyes fell on the woman I'd seen by the water well earlier, standing idly in the doorway and looking a little nonplussed. I guess the room had filled up without my noticing, since she seemed to be trying to spot an empty seat. Maybe she was looking for the two men she'd arrived with?

Her eyes met mine, and she smiled and came over to my table.

"Pardon me, but would you mind terribly if I sat here?"

"Go right ahead." There was no way I could turn down sharing a table with a beautiful woman. I was a little embarrassed after what happened at the bath, but I did my best not to let it show.

> Skill Acquired: "Poker Face"

When the message popped up in the log in the corner of my vision, I funneled points into the new skill with record-breaking speed.

Noticing the newcomer to my table, Martha came over to get her order. She must have failed to see the woman looking for a seat before because she'd been relaying my order to the kitchen.

"I'll pass on the meat, thank you. Just the soup and rye bread for me. I'll have an ale, too, if you please."

“Sure, I’ll be right back with it.”

Martha’s hard sell on the boar steak didn’t seem to have worked on the woman, presumably a vegetarian, so she looked a little dejected as she went back to the kitchen.

“The barroom’s awfully busy, considering the inn’s so low on guests,” I commented as Martha returned with the lovely woman’s food and ale.

“That’s true. But now that I’ve tasted how delicious the food is, I can understand why.”

“Eh-heh-heh! Thank you! I’ll tell my father that later.”

She seemed pleased by my compliment. Apparently, the cook was her father.

“Mr. Satou, your food’s going to be just a little longer, so you can eat this while you wait if you’d like.” She placed in front of me a small plate of what looked like the sauerkraut I’d eaten that afternoon, saying it was on the house.

The woman murmured a “pardon me” and started to eat. I watched as she dipped the rye bread into the vegetable soup, scooping it up to her mouth.

Oh, is that how you’re meant to eat it?

“Is something wrong?”

“Oh, I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to stare. I just didn’t know you were supposed to eat the bread like that.”

I guess my “Poker Face” skill couldn’t disguise the fact that I was staring at someone.

“Ah, are you from the royal capital or the formal capital?”

“No, I’m from a kingdom far from here…”

Does the food differ depending on the region? And I understand “royal capital,” but what is the “formal capital”?

“Do they not eat rye bread in the royal capital and the…formal capital?”

“Well, commoners do eat rye bread there, but I hear that the nobles and wealthy merchants in the royal capital eat white bread. And they say the formal capital’s staple food is a grain called rice, so they don’t eat much bread.”

Huh… So there's a city in this kingdom with a rice-based culture? *I'll have to check it out if I start craving rice.* Since I normally live off junk food and instant ramen, though, that probably wouldn't happen a whole lot.

Oh, maybe I should ask more about this "formal capital." I asked the woman what it was as she ate her bread-soaked soup.

"It's Duke Ougoch's capital in the south. It was the first capital when the Shiga Kingdom was founded."

"Huh! So it's like the old capital? I'd love to see it someday."

"Oh yes. It's said to be a beautiful city on the bank of a large river."

Ooh, that sounds nice. The starry sky reflected in the canals… It would definitely make for a lovely sight.

"Mr. Satou, your food's ready! Sorry for the wait."

"Oh, this smells great!"

Five cuts of bone-in meat rested on top of a wave-patterned plate. Were these ribs, maybe? Looking at the other patrons, it seemed like holding it by the bone and gnawing on the meat was the way to go, even if that resulted in a mess of grease getting on your hands and face.

I pulled out one of the handkerchiefs I'd purchased and placed it on the table for later. If possible, I'd prefer to avoid getting my face all sticky in front of a beautiful woman.

Obviously, there was no way this meat could've been cooked in a pressure cooker, yet it fell off the bone as easily as if it had. Some of the other guests around me seemed to be struggling with theirs, so Martha might have picked out the best pieces for me.

I wiped my hands with the handkerchief and took another swig of mead. *Yeah, this is the best, all right.*

I saw the woman gulp from the corner of my eye. (I wasn't paying close attention to her, but my line of sight did happen to be around her collarbone at the time.) Maybe she wasn't a vegetarian at all and had refrained from ordering the meat for financial reasons?

“You’re welcome to have a piece, if you’d like,” I offered.

Her face lit up with excitement for a moment, then faltered hesitantly, until her appetite finally won out over her shyness. “Well then, if you don’t mind…,” she murmured, and picked up a small piece.

Lovely as she might have been, the woman dropped all pretenses as she dug into the bone-in meat. *Well, I’m glad she likes it.* When she finished eating, she licked her fingers in an undeniably sexy gesture.

Since she didn’t seem to have a handkerchief, I gently pushed mine across the table toward her. The beauty thanked me and accepted it, wiping her hands clean.

She still looked a bit hungry, so I offered her more of the meat as we engaged in lively conversation. Apparently, she was from Seiryuu City, but she’d married a merchant and lived in the royal capital until recently. Her husband had passed away, so she’d returned to her hometown. The men who’d come with her to the inn were friends of her husband and had offered to accompany her to Seiryuu City, she explained.

I ordered more drinks and snacks from Martha, enjoying the woman’s talk of the royal capital.

Uh, what do I do now?

We’d been drinking together as the woman relayed tales of the royal capital and her journey to Seiryuu City, but it seemed I’d made two grave miscalculations.

First, apparently my high level made my tolerance to alcohol quite strong. I’d felt mildly intoxicated when I drank the mead, but it seemed to wear off pretty fast. I’d even picked up an “Alcohol Resistance” skill somewhere along the way. Luckily, perhaps because the mead was watered down, I hadn’t gotten an Alcoholic title or anything like that.

The second miscalculation was that the woman drinking alongside me was now leaning heavily over the table. If this had been a college mixer, I might have thought of bringing her home, but I could see that was wrong now, especially since she was recently widowed.

Instead, I waited until Martha had a free moment and asked her to guide me to the woman's room so I could carry her to the bed. I wouldn't have been able to fit up the cramped staircase if I'd carried her bridal-style, so I had to sling her over my shoulder instead.

"What a gentleman you are, Mr. Satou!"

"Oh, not at all." I bade the admiring Martha good night and returned to my room.

I could still feel the pleasant warmth of the woman I'd carried on my back.

Taking off my robe and placing it in Storage, I dove into bed.

Man, this inn was a good choice. The food was delicious, the bed was clean, the staff was adorable, and the woman in the neighboring room was beautiful. This was much better service than I'd come to expect from my dreams.

The surprisingly comfortable bed seemed like it should put me straight to sleep, but the excitement of the day and my conversation with the beautiful woman kept me up for a while. As I waited for sleep to come, I started playing back in my head the events of the dream so far.

——The lizardmen and dragons I defeated with the Meteor Showers. I hadn't been able to see the dragons, but the lizardmen had been realistic enough to make all of Hollywood weep for joy. This dream of mine had an impressive attention to detail.

——The battle between the count's army and the wyvern. The encounter with Zena and her comrades was intense enough for an RPG commercial. I'd committed a hit-and-run by mistake, and now that wyvern was probably in little Yuni's stomach.

——The streets and people of Seiryuu City. Ever since my arrival, the realism of the city streets and the variety of outfits the people wore had amazed me. The disparity of wealth in the city, the different kinds of clothing for different occupations, the patchwork clothes and dirty shoes—there was such immense variety that it was hard to believe this was a dream. I wish Mr. Tubs would step it up and put the same level of effort into his setting designs.

——And the food I'd had earlier. The mead, which I'd never tasted before, was delicious, and the wild boar steak was absurdly good. It would be no exaggeration to say the combination of the steak and my first-ever rye bread was probably the best thing I'd ever eaten. I had never had meat like that in Japan. My subconscious had a better imagination than I'd thought, inventing all these scenes, languages, and even tastes I'd never experienced before.

…Hmm.

The realization had been slowly sinking in all along, but putting it together now… *There is no way I can go on calling this a dream*.

When had I first gotten the sense that something was off? I'd definitely felt it when I saw the realistic detail of the city streets, but even the people I'd met along the way hadn't looked or thought like anyone from the stories or games I knew.

And I didn't know anything about phrases like *trimoon* or Zena's father's full rank, a *hereditary knight*, which was apparently different from a regular knight or viscount. I had a feeling there was just too much information in this dream that didn't come from my own knowledge.

The most extreme cases of this were the languages, like Shigan and the "ancient scalefolk language." Even when I was in middle school with delusions of being a sorcerer, I'd never created my own language. At best, I'd patched together words from foreign languages.

And that food! I'd had quiche before, so my afternoon meal could have been my imagination, but I had no idea what mead tasted like, and if I was able to invent a taste as incredible as that wild boar, I might as well just start living in my dreams.

At any rate, I didn't have enough information to figure out how I'd ended up in this situation, so I put that question on hold. I still couldn't entirely dismiss the possibility that this was a dream, but for now, my best bet was probably to assume this was some kind of gamelike parallel world.

As for my current course of action, I figured I might as well continue enjoying my travels here while still looking for a way back home.

Yep, sightseeing was the primary goal.

Of course, it wasn't like I didn't want to ever return to my normal routine, but hey, I was in another world! I wanted to live it up as much as possible and use my experiences as inspiration for my work as a game creator.

Besides, we'd already turned in *FFL*, and all that was left to do for *WW* were some numerical adjustments. And there was perfect documentation for that already, so I was sure even Mr. Tubs could take care of it somehow if it came to that.

I might get fired for taking time off from work without permission, but luckily, my old coworkers who had retired could always lend me some cash. I'd get by just fine until I found another job.

And as for my personal life, my girlfriend had long since dumped me, and my parents were happily living in the countryside with my older sister and her husband. My family's pretty laid-back, so even if I disappeared for a while, I doubted they'd worry much.

My sister might get mad at me, but she did take over my old room with great pleasure the second I moved to Tokyo and all, and I was sure I could get back on her good side with tales of my travels.

And if, for any reason, it turned out that I couldn't return to my own world, it didn't seem like I'd have too much trouble getting by here; the only things that could threaten my peaceful existence were probably demon lords or gods.

Surely, as long as I kept living quietly, beings like that would have no reason to go out of their way to mess with me. I could just go on seeing the sights and living a modest life.

I was afraid that if I started picking fights and throwing around barrages of Meteor Showers, it would raise an event flag for me to become a huge demon lord myself. And I certainly wasn't looking to cause any (additional) mass genocides in the first place.

Peace was the priority, after all.

Date

Satou here. I've always been relatively popular with younger girls, but I make sure it never goes any further than friendship, and I've never dated any of them. Whenever I fall in love with someone, for some reason it's always an older woman.

I awoke to the loud noise of someone rudely knocking on my door.

"Mr. Satou, are you awake?"

"Yeah, I am now."

A slim ray of sunlight snuck in through a crack in the closed-up window. It was the sole window in the room, big enough only to peek your head through, without any glass. Maybe it was just for ventilation? I remembered that Martha had advised that I close it overnight to prevent crime.

I did a quick check of my appearance before heading to the door. A whole night had passed, yet there wasn't any stubble on my face. *Oh, right, I couldn't grow any facial hair when I was fifteen.* When it finally happened after I started college, I was so thrilled that I went around showing it off to everyone.

…Though my girlfriend at the time immediately told me to shave it.

I didn't have any bedhead, either, so I put on the white embroidered robe I'd bought yesterday and left my room.

"Good morning."

"If you don't hurry up, your girlfriend's going to come looking for you!"

Excuse me? My girlfriend dumped me over six months ago because I was too busy with work, you know. And I knew virtually no one in this city to begin with.

When I followed Martha downstairs, I found the magic soldier Zena waiting for me. "Good morning, Satou!"

“Oh, good morning. That’s a very cute outfit you’re wearing today.” Zena must have been off duty, because she wasn’t in her uniform. Instead, she wore a white blouse with a light-blue skirt, with a somewhat large yellow-green shawl over her shoulders. It wasn’t particularly fashionable, but on Zena, it gave a neat and wholesome impression.

Must be nice, being a pretty girl.

Didn’t she sprain her ankle? Is she all right walking around like that?

“Is your leg doing better now?”

“Yes, a priest at Garleon Temple healed it for me yesterday!”

Ah, so a priest healed it. That’s fantasy for you! It must have been Holy Magic or something.

“And, um, since I’m off duty today…I thought maybe…that is, um…I could show you around the city…!” She looked like she was going to faint. *No need to be so tense…*

I must have made a strange face as I suppressed my amusement at her anxious gestures, because her face started to fall.

Oh dear.

“Thank you very much! I’d certainly appreciate that.”

“Really? Great!” Zena rewarded my acceptance of her offer with a huge smile, like a blooming sunflower.

Yep, her youthfulness was blindingly radiant, all right.

I washed my face and set out with Zena.

She suggested we get breakfast from the food carts at the morning market on South Street. I guess she had no reservations about going there, despite being the daughter of an aristocrat.

Carried by the wind, the scent of soy sauce tickled my nose.

“Is that soy sauce I smell…?”

“That’s right! It’s one of the two great seasonings created by the ancestral king Yamato. It’s even exported to other countries! Did they not have it where you

came from, Satou?”

“They did—I just haven’t smelled it in a long time.”

“Ohh, I see!”

I wondered if *Yamato* was written with the same kanji as the old name for Japan. Was the other “great seasoning” miso, perhaps?

Zena beckoned me over toward a cart where they were cooking something in oil. Croquettes, maybe?

“Good morning! Two Seiryuu croquettes, please.”

“Certainly! Just a moment.”

It seemed like the oil was made from tallow; the smell was awfully intense.

“Miss Lilio isn’t with you today?”

“She just got back from a long expedition yesterday, so she’s still asleep in her room.”

The man gave Zena two croquettes wrapped in leaves, and she held one out to me. They were a copper coin each, so while her hands were still full, I paid the vendor myself.

“Wait, I wanted to treat you as thanks for yesterday!”

“No, no, it’s fine. You’ve done more than enough already by bringing me to the city and helping me get settled.”

We sat on a stone bench near the cart to eat our croquettes. The bench was a bit dirty, so I took out a pair of handkerchiefs and spread them on the bench before we sat down.

Zena giggled. “I feel a bit like a princess.” Looking pleased and a little embarrassed, she took tiny, delicate bites of the croquette in her hands. I admired the scene as I ate my own croquette.

The deep-fried, meatless potato croquette was pretty good, but it was a little too heavy, maybe because of the oil. I got the feeling that if I ate more than two, I’d have heartburn for the rest of the day.

“Lilio’s boyfriend is actually the one who popularized the Seiryuu croquette.”

“Oh? Is he a chef?”

“No, not exactly. He can’t really cook himself, but he knows how a lot of things are made. It’s very unusual.”

Hmm. I know it’s bad to jump to conclusions, but that sounded like a Japanese person to me. It seemed like other Japanese people had come to this world, too, like that “ancestral king Yamato.” Maybe there was an easy way to get here and back, like walking through a wardrobe or something.

I finished eating first, and as I sat there idly, a little girl with flowers in a small wicker basket approached me. She stopped in front of me, holding out one small blossom.

“Excuse me, sir! Buy a flower, please?”

The little girl had been glancing in my direction repeatedly for a while, so she must have waited till I finished eating to take her chance. Pretty smart for such a young girl.

“Sure, I’ll buy one. How much?”

“It’s one penny.”

I handed her the asking price and received a flower in return. The girl thanked me happily before racing off to find her next prospective customer.

I handed the flower to Zena—after waiting for her to finish eating her croquette and wiping her hands clean, of course. She looked unusually surprised. *Uh, what else was I going to do with it?*

“Um…are you sure it’s okay for me to take it?”

“Of course. It would trouble me if you didn’t.”

I mean, I’m not gonna throw it away.

Zena smiled like she was trying in vain to disguise her happiness. *Is it really that big of a deal? Well, I’m glad she’s happy about it, I guess.*

I bought some melon-like fruit cut into bite-size slices to clear my palate, then tried some kind of plant stalks fried with soy sauce. I was a bit doubtful based on their looks, but they turned out to be perfectly tasty.

The next cart that Zena brought me to, however, was even more off-putting.

“These are called dragon wings! They’re fried bat wings coated in black miso sauce. It’s a Seiryuu City specialty!”

So did dragon wings look similar to bat wings? Apparently, this food was supposed to bring good luck. Zena promised they tasted better than they looked, so I trusted her and bought two.

As I was paying for our wings, I heard Zena let out a short cry behind me.

“Sorry, lady!”

A kid had bumped into Zena as he ran by. That was fine in itself, but unfortunately, the goopy miso sauce from the dragon wing had gotten all over Zena’s white blouse.

“The blouse I borrowed from my mother…,” she whispered, her eyes filling with tears. Maybe if we went to Teputa Avenue we could find someone to remove the stain?

“Excuse me? I couldn’t help but notice your troubles. Are you by chance in need of a charmer?”

“Sorry, but what we need is a laundromat where we can get out this stain.” *Why is this person peddling charms or whatever at a time like this? Be a little more sensitive.*

“Well, you see, I happen to be skilled at Everyday Magic. I could use it to clean that stain.”

Oh, so that’s what a charmer does? Her perfect timing was awfully suspicious, but for the moment, getting rid of the stain was the top priority. “Please do, then.”

“Certainly. That’ll be three large coppers for the cleaning-and-drying spell set.”

I didn’t want to bother with haggling, so I simply paid her the three coins to work her magic.

“Now then, first I’ll remove the stain… ■■■ ■■■■ ■■■■■ ***Soft Wash Juusenjou!***”

The Everyday Magic cast on Zena left her sopping wet. The chest wrap that she wore in place of a bra was showing through her now-transparent shirt, so I quickly pulled a largish towel out of Storage and put it around her shoulders. I heard a few grumbles of disappointment from some unsavory men around us, but I ignored them.

The sticky miso stain that had been on Zena's blouse moments ago had vanished completely. Just like magic!

"And now I'm going to dry you off… ■■■ ■■■■■***Dry*** *Kansou!*"

Just as if it'd been put through a drying machine, the blouse was suddenly free of water. Once I checked that her shirt was no longer see-through, I reached out to take back the towel. My hand must have entered the field of the drying spell when I did so, because I suddenly felt dry warmth and static as if I'd put my hand in a dryer.

> Skill Acquired: "Everyday Magic"

Wow, that's all it took for me to learn it? Magic skills are super easy to pick up.

That being said, the incantations seemed much harder to learn, so maybe it balanced out.

As soon as the spells were finished, the young charmer girl vanished into the crowd.

Well, I have a magic user with me right here, so maybe she can tell me about it. If I could learn Everyday Magic, I could use that in place of a washer and dryer.

"Zena, how do you recite the incantations for spells?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the pronunciation seems pretty strange to me…"

"I see… Well, most Wind Magic spells start with ■■■■. If I had to sound it out, it'd be something like 'lyuuu lia (etc.)…laaa luleli laaaao,' maybe? But even if they can memorize them, most beginners still can't sing the incantations at first. It's…"

Zena tilted her head pensively, trying to figure out how best to explain it.

“…rhythm. Yeah, that’s it. You take that slow chant I said before and sing it to a steady rhythm. And if you keep that rhythm and increase the tempo, you’ll have ■■■■! In theory, anyway.”

Curious, I tried to practice the phrase she’d taught me, but after a few minutes, I had the feeling I wasn’t going to get anywhere. “That’s pretty difficult.”

“Well, yes, of course it is! It normally takes years to learn the incantations.”

“How many years did you have to study before you could use Wind Magic, then, Zena?”

“Technically, I’d say about three years of training. But thinking about it now, it feels like I’ve been training to be a sorcerer every day of my life.”

What did that mean? The faintest trace of a shadow, or maybe bitterness, clouded Zena’s usually bright smile. “For starters, I had children’s books about the history of magic read aloud to me, practiced reading poems aloud and abdominal breathing… I had toys that taught me the flow of magic, too. From lessons to playtime, everything was designed to help me grow into a sorcerer.”

I see… So she was raised sort of like a gifted child? There were little kids in Japan who couldn’t play with other children because they had lessons, too, so I guess this was sort of like that.

Maybe I shouldn’t have asked.

“Oh, but I don’t have any ill will toward my parents for raising me like that or anything! It’s fun to use magic, and my goal is to be able to fly someday.” Sensing that the mood had gotten a bit gloomy, Zena quickly added, “So why are you interested in practicing magic, Satou? Would it be useful for your trade?”

“Oh, no… There’s no bath in the inn, so I thought maybe if I could use Everyday Magic, I wouldn’t have to bathe outside and stuff.” Trying to lighten things up, I gave the silliest reason I could think of.

My clowning must have worked, because Zena stared at me incredulously for a moment, then burst out laughing. “Ah-ha-ha-ha! I’ve never heard of anyone wanting to learn magic for a reason like that!”

Was it really that ridiculous…? I must have hit her funny bone, because Zena couldn't seem to stop laughing.

"Is that weird?" *I was mostly joking, but I didn't think it was that bad of a reason. Who wouldn't want to make an annoying task more convenient?*

Her reply was instantaneous. "Yes, it is! Really weird!"

"I mean, if you had the time and money to learn magic, you'd be better off installing a bath in your house, wouldn't you? And you could just hire a servant or buy a slave to heat it up for you!"

Oh, so that's how it is…

I tend to think that if I can do something, I'd rather just take care of it myself, but I guess it was normal to buy labor here. Apparently, it didn't cost much, either.

But now that I knew the basics, I figured I could find an introductory book and practice the lines some more.

At any rate, sometime during the course of this conversation, I'd gained the skill "Secrecy" and the titles Clown and Gentleman. But I didn't have time to worry about my log too much.

Having successfully restored the positive mood of our trip, I continued walking around with Zena, trying different foods. Our next destination was a sweet-smelling dessert area.

"This is a fried sweet bun! They make a paste with steamed sweet potatoes and knead it into the dough before frying it."

A dessert-like bun made with sweet potato… That sounded vaguely Japanese to me. As I ate the sweet bun, I also sipped on a hot beverage that tasted sort of like watered-down ginger tea.

"And I saved the best for last! Lilio told me about this place." The next stall Zena had guided me to was selling the same malt syrup candy I'd had with Martha yesterday. The shopkeeper was even wearing the same apron as the man we'd bought them from.

I gave the man two copper coins and bought one for each of us. Taking two

slim sticks, the man dipped them into the sticky brown liquid and rotated them slowly before pulling them back out.

Zena seemed so excited about showing me, so I would've felt bad saying I'd had some yesterday. Instead, I decided to act like it had been a really long time.

"Malt syrup candy, huh? That brings back memories."

"Oh…so you've had it before?"

She looked a bit disappointed. Damn… I guess I should have acted surprised for her.

"The syrup candy I'm used to is usually clear, so I didn't know what it was at first."

"Young master, the colorless syrup candy is a high-class product, made with rice and sugar. Ours is more for commoners, so we use potatoes and gabo fruits with malt. That's why it's brown, y'see." The older man cut in rather quickly.

Young master? Who, me? He didn't seem to be talking to Zena.

"Oh, sir…I'm just a commoner myself. A friend gave me the clear candy a long time ago—I didn't know it was a high-class item."

I mean, it was only two hundred yen at a festival.

After that, we browsed the other stalls, enjoying the sights and sounds of the crowded street.

I decided to buy some fried pastries made with honey for the girls working hard back at the Gatefront Inn. Zena and I each ate one, and they were pretty tasty. I figured the girls would like them, too.

After having more than our fill of food and drink, we visited some stalls selling miscellaneous goods.

A stand with cute shells and bisque pottery caught my eye. For some reason, the market price shown by my "Estimation" skill for the shells was pretty high. When I asked the elderly shopkeeper about them, she explained that they were vessels for holding medicine.

"This salve is very effective, young master."

“Oh? What does it do?”

“It works wonders for cuts or chapped skin. If you hand it out to your servants, why, they’ll work hard as horses!”

On closer examination, the wrinkled old shopkeeper’s skin was much less cracked than the Gatefront Inn’s landlady. She’d fed me well with delicious food, so I decided I might as well buy some for her as a souvenir. And while the price was expensive for shells, it was still only a few copper coins.

“I’ll take five, then, please.”

“Now, that would be fifteen copper coins, but I’ll knock it down to twelve for you.”

Wow, that’s actually lower than the market price. I reached into my pocket for the money to pay the woman, but Zena’s slim hand stopped me midmotion.

“Excuse me, madam, but that seems a little high. Wasn’t it two for one copper last time I came here? And since he’s buying five, couldn’t you make it nine?”

Whoa. Zena was smiling sweetly as she drove a ridiculous bargain.

“My, I didn’t notice before because you have a man with you today, but aren’t you the girl who’s usually with Lilio? Well, I can’t go any lower than ten coppers.”

“Then can you throw in three of these small ones here, please?” Recognizing that she wasn’t going to lower the price any further, Zena had pointed at some small shell vessels beside the salve I was buying and asked for them as a bonus. Based on their size, I’d guess the miniature ones could hold about a third as much as the bigger shells could.

“Goodness, girl! If you start acting like that Lilio, you might never get married. I’ll throw in one of the small ones and nothing more.”

Zena’s face twitched a little at the part about marriage, but she maintained her smile as she evenly accepted the bargain. “Very well. That’ll work just fine.”

She’s only seventeen… It’s a little early to be worrying about marriage, isn’t it?

The old lady skillfully wrapped the shells in leaves, then used some kind of thin vine to bind them together. *If I put them in my bag like that, I feel like they’re going to make a mess.* I thanked Zena for looking out for me and gave her one of

the shells.

I would have done it anyway, so…

After we'd reached the end of the street stalls, Zena brought me somewhere new.

"Are you sure you're all right with coming to a place like this?"

"Yeah, the breeze feels great."

"Hee-hee, that's true." Zena giggled as she surveyed the scenery below. We were standing atop one of the towers of the city walls. I had spotted it from the area past the street stalls, so she'd offered to take me there. Since it was a military installation, I couldn't look around unless I was with her.

Zena seemed to be relatively famous, because even in her civilian clothes, she was allowed up without a problem.

"I know I'm the one who asked, but are you sure it's all right to bring someone up here who's not part of the military?"

"It's fine! The only attacks we have to fear out here in this city are from wyverns. We haven't fought with any neighboring countries for a few hundred years, and the war with the beastfolk ended ten years ago."

Hmm… I wonder if the beastfolk slaves in the city were prisoners of war from that period?

"Zena, what is that windmill used for?"

"Oh, that? It's a flour mill. But it can also be turned into a gun battery platform in case of a wyvern attack."

A gun battery? In the middle of town? "If they fired cannons from a spot like that, wouldn't it damage the houses nearby?"

"Well, they do have cannons, but against a wyvern they fire only nets or blanks."

"I see… So it's used to drive a wyvern away in a different direction?"

"That's right. They drive it over to a field in that manor over there so they can finish it off."

Wouldn't that destroy the field, too?

Zena could tell that I was really interested in this subject, so she offered to take me to the manor and windmill. I'd been planning to ask her later, anyway, so that worked out for me.

Along the way to the nearby windmill, Zena said we could stop off at Parion Temple. *The shady priest raising a fuss yesterday was from Zaicuon, right? And the one who healed Zena's leg was Garleon… I wonder if all the gods have "-on" at the end of their names?*

"Ah, there it is!"

A few streets away from the area with all the stalls, we arrived at Parion Temple. It was on a pretty big plot of land—about three-quarters of an acre? At any rate, it was three times the size of any normal house.

The wall around the area seemed to serve as the outer wall of the temple. It was made of stone; upon going through the arched entrance, I could see a space for parking horses and carriages and a wide-open gate.

There was an expensive-looking carriage in the parking area. Maybe it was wrong of me to presume, but I had a strong suspicion this clergy was loaded.

Zena took my hand and guided me into the temple. Inside was a large room with a high ceiling at least thirty feet up. Various banners and holy symbols decorated the room, and several priests were performing a sort of baptism ritual for the child of someone who looked like a merchant.

There were skylights in the ceiling, though no stained glass; on the upper half of the wall, there was a painting of a sword-wielding knight locked in combat with a horned demon. The image was a bit strange but oddly powerful.

"That's a picture of the first hero battling the demon lord."

"Oh, that's the hero? I was sure he was a knight."

"You can tell because his Holy Sword is glowing blue. It would be easy to tell if he was a knight—he'd be wielding a Magic Sword instead, and those glow red."

Come to think of it, those Holy Swords I have glowed blue when I first took them out, too. But it lasted for only a second.

“Is the hero’s Holy Sword the only one that glows?”

“A Holy Sword should glow blue only if it’s accepted the wielder. But some Holy Swords have been used by people without the title of Hero—like Gjallarhorn, which the ancestral king Yamato left behind, and Claíomh Solais, the Holy Sword that protects our kingdom.”

“Accepted the wielder,” huh? I didn’t have a whole lot of confidence in my heroism, so I doubted a Holy Sword would accept me anytime soon. Anyway, Claíomh Solais was a famous enough name that it sounded familiar, but I’d never heard of Gjallarhorn.

Oh, but I got a bunch of titles, too… Since I did kill some dragons, I wonder if I got the Hero title? When I opened the list of titles to check, I encountered something strange.

…Godkiller?

Alarmed, I double-checked my log. Luckily, it didn’t seem like anything had been deleted yet.

Among the notifications of enemies I’d defeated, there was a scattered handful of titles. I’d gotten a few titles like Lizardman Slayer, Dragon Slayer [Lesser], Dragon Slayer [Fully Grown], Dragon Slayer [Ancient], and Dragon Slayer [God]. Aside from *Slayer, there were also ones like* Destroyer and Natural Enemy of ~.

And after all those…

> Defeated Dragon God Aconcagua!

> Title Acquired: Godkiller

Do you believe in gods?

I see… So the Meteor Shower can even kill gods? It can, huh…

I’d panicked and fired off three of them, but if I had stopped at one, would I have been met with a counterattack from an angry god? All’s well that ends well, I guess.

“That doesn’t mean just anyone can use a Holy Sword.”

After I'd fallen silent in shock, a woman's gentle voice broke in to our conversation…

"Only those heroes who answer the call of our youthful goddess Parion can fight a demon lord. Before a hero who wields a Holy Sword from such a god, even a demon lord can do naught but fall to his knees."

Turning around, I saw a young woman in a scarlet outfit not unlike a Western nun's. Something about her, maybe her pale eye color, made her whole presence seem somehow faint to me. Her attire was different from the clothes I'd seen on the other clergy here. Was she an important figure?

Beside her face, an AR screen began to display the woman's information. Very convenient.

"Sister Ohna!"

"It is good to see you again at last, Zena of the house of Marienteil. Is your younger brother in good health?"

"Yes! He's going to become the new head of the family next year, so he's studying hard."

"I see. If anything should arise that I can be of help with, please don't hesitate to ask."

Having talked with the priestess for a moment, Zena turned toward me for introductions. "Sister Ohna is the count's daughter. My mother was her wet nurse, so Sister Ohna is always worrying about my younger brother's health."

I see… She must care a lot about Zena's brother, then. She'd approached us just to ask about him, after all.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm a peddler by the name of Satou."

"I am Sister Ohna, a priestess who serves the temple of Parion. Please forget the lineage Zena spoke of; such worldly status is meaningless in the temple."

So being a priestess here was sort of like being a Buddhist monk?

Though she was younger than Zena, her calm disposition somehow made her seem more like a doting mother.

“Still, your visitation brings me great peace of mind. Until now, Zena has only ever shown interest in the study of magic, but it seems spring has come for her at last.”

“Wh-wha…? No! It’s not like that at all! Satou and I, um, we’ve only just met, so…!” Zena, who apparently had little experience with love, seemed disproportionately flustered by Ohna’s remarks and was frantically making excuses. Her pubescent thought process was written all over her face: *I’m fond of him…but it’s not love or anything… But I don’t think I’d object if…*

She was so innocent… It brought back memories of my school days.

I wanted to talk with the priestess a little longer, but a commotion near the entrance forced us to break it off.

“Your Holiness! The head of the Boril family is deathly ill! He’s still far too young—please come help him!”

“Master Boril, is it? We novices alone can’t allay his illness…”

“Send the priestess, then!”

“Isn’t the Boril estate in the west quarter? We can’t very well send the revered priestess serving as our god’s Oracle to a place of brothels and filth!”

“Please! I’m begging you!”

A priest and a man who seemed to have barged into the temple were having a heated discussion. Sister Ohna turned to Zena. “There appears to be an emergency, so I must take my leave now, Zena.”

With that, the priestess walked over to the two men. “I will go. Please prepare the carriage.”

The priest still seemed indignant at the thought, but he was no match for the will of the “Oracle” herself. I could hear him arguing with her in an urgent whisper. It’s rude to eavesdrop, of course, but I’d forgotten to turn off my “Keen Hearing” skill, so I ended up tuning in.

“Sister Ohna, should you not go to the count to convey the Oracle you received not long ago?”

“I have already entrusted the head priest with that task.”

“But the prediction said there would be a disaster at Zaicuon Temple—it’s far too dangerous to go near it in the west quarter!”

“I believe it will be fine. The Boril estate is far from their temple.”

Zaicuon Temple, huh? That’s where that tubby priest was from, the one who’d been preaching in the east quarter. Was he going to do something drastic to win back followers?

Well, we’d just have to make sure we didn’t get too close if it seemed like a riot or something was about to break out. I was sure I could pick up Zena and hop onto a roof if it came to that.

Zena and I left the temple and returned to our stroll through town.

Walking around the European-style streets with a lovely young lady was certainly fun. Parks, open plazas, public wells, and the like were distributed throughout the city at regular intervals. We walked along a path next to one such park, taking in the scenery.

In a little plaza where the grass was cut short, we saw an old couple with an infant relaxing on a bench and a group of ten or so youngsters practicing martial arts. I’d thought the turf was a uniform lawn, but on closer inspection, I saw it was a mixture of different weeds and grasses.

Zena seemed to have found something of interest, because she stopped suddenly and rushed over to a large tree in the middle of the park.

“What’s the matter?”

“Satou, look what I found…”

Zena held out her hands—cupped inside was a baby bird.

A beautiful girl holding up a tiny bird, sunlight filtering down through the trees… Now, that was a picture worth a thousand words.

“It looks like there’s a nest at the top of the tree.”

The nearest branch was about eight feet up… Hmm. I could make that jump in one go easily enough, but that would probably look a little too superhuman. It was probably best to just climb and pull myself up.

“Um, Satou, could you please…?” Zena asked timidly, so of course I gladly agreed.

I’d already planned to, anyway.

Accepting the baby bird in one hand, I grabbed the first branch with the other. I did a one-armed pull-up to get onto that branch, putting my foot up and clambering to stand against the tree trunk. It was pretty tough to do without crushing the little chick.

The nest was at the base of a branch two or three up from the one I was standing on, but I was able to reach up and return it without too much trouble. As soon as I put the baby bird back in the nest, its mother swooped down at me furiously, so I was sadly too busy defending myself to enjoy the sight of the little chicks peeping for food with their tiny beaks opened wide.

Since I had the use of both hands now, getting down was much easier. When I reached the last branch, I had to remember to grab on to it and hang down for a moment before landing on my feet. I didn’t want to worry Zena by jumping straight down, after all.

“Wow! Satou, you really are very nimble!”

“Oh, it was nothing special.” Dodging Zena’s compliment, I returned to our idle chatter.

As we talked, it turned out that Zena had intended to ask me to lift her up so that she could return the bird herself. Oh, Zena. Good thing I misunderstood, because a skirt wasn’t exactly ideal tree-climbing wear.

Watching the group of kids practicing their martial arts, I asked Zena a question. “What sort of things does the army do for training?”

“Hmm… Well, the soldiers train the same way here as anywhere else, but magic soldiers have to be mindful that they don’t use up all their magic. The majority of us try to keep ourselves ready to cast at full power.”

I see. So they break up their training? It made sense—a magic soldier who couldn’t cast spells wouldn’t be of much use to anyone.

“The assigned roles of magic soldiers and sorcerers vary based on their

attributes. This tends to surprise people outside of the army, but for example, Fire users are the only group that really focuses on direct attack spells."

Yeah, I guess fire is definitely attack-oriented.

"As a Wind user, I have useful spells like Wind Protection, which defends against arrows; Air Cushion, which can stop battering rams; and Whisper Wind, which can convey orders. It'd be great to use Fly for scouting from the air and such, but there's nobody in the county who knows how to use that."

That's right—wasn't Zena's goal to be able to fly?

"If you learn how to fly, it'd be fun to go on a date in the sky or something."

I meant it as a joke, but Zena flushed all the way down to her neck and stammered, "P-please look forward to it!"

She was cute, but I was worried some ill-intentioned person was going to take advantage of her sooner or later.

When we emerged on the other side of the park, we'd arrived right at the foot of the windmill.

We weren't able to go up to the top, but we did get to see the first floor where they grind the flour. There was something exciting about the sights and thunderous sounds of the dense metal machinery at work.

But all in all, it was a pretty normal windmill. Since this was a fantasy world, I would've liked to see some spirits dancing around as they ground the flour or something.

With that on my mind, I asked Zena about it. "Couldn't they use magic to grind the flour somehow?"

"Probably, but…using a mill is much easier," she replied, shooting me a look saying, *What kind of question is that?*

Our next destination, the manor field, was a little far to walk, so we took a horse-drawn carriage along Center Street. Apparently, it cost one large copper for any destination as long as it was within city limits. The vehicle was clearly meant for sightseeing, as it had no roof and the seats were about shoulder height.

We moved along through the city at an easy trot. A carriage ride through town in an exotic country with a beautiful girl at my side—this I could get used to. It'd be even better if it was a gorgeous, voluptuous woman, but that was probably a bit too much to ask.

The cart left the main street and headed north through a workers' district. There, we saw many more vaguely muscular, stubborn-looking people. We passed by buildings that looked like workshops and factories, then through a

lumberyard, until we were before the inner wall of the city.

Proceeding west, we reached a small path between the outer wall at the western city limit and the inner wall, on the other side of which was the lord's manor.

"Once we pass through here, we'll be right at the field."

"These walls are pretty impressive, looking up at them on both sides like this."

"Yes! It makes you feel safe, doesn't it?"

Zena clenched both fists and drew a little closer to me. At that moment, with what seemed like deliberate timing, the cart jerked abruptly. We must have hit a pebble.

"Ah!" Zena lost her balance and toppled right into me, forcing me to catch her. She certainly felt a lot softer than she had in her armor before. There still wasn't much worth mentioning about her chest, but she was very soft and feminine, though I'd rather wait at least another five years or so before doing anything like this.

"Are you all right?"

"Y-yes! I'm sorry, I'll get up right now!" Flustered, Zena quickly pulled away from me. *You don't need to feel so bad about it.*

For just a moment, I could swear I saw the coachman snicker. *Was that on purpose?!* This driver would make a great wingman.

After traveling this path for a little while longer, we came upon an open gate with a soldier standing guard. The driver nodded at him lightly, then proceeded through the gate into the lord's manor.

The land seemed too small to provide enough food for the entire city, yet too large to serve as the feudal lord's personal field. Our carriage proceeded slowly along the pastoral road. It looked like the farmhands were harvesting something. Using my "Telescopic Sight" skill, I was able to see that they were gathering the "gabo fruits" I'd seen yesterday.

And like at the market, a lot of the helpers were kids of only around elementary school age.

“Those children are probably from orphanages. Since it’s harvest season, the kids from town might have come to work, too.”

“Are those gabo fruits tasty?”

“No, not at all. They show up in army rations sometimes, but they’re so smelly and bitter, nobody really likes them.”

Zena was making an extremely unpleasant face. Did she hate them that much?

“If they’re that bad, why grow so many?” It seemed like an obvious question as I looked over the large field of gabo fruit. *Wouldn’t it be better to just grow, say, potatoes? I wonder if they’re particularly rich in nutrients or calories or something?*

“The civil officials say they’re a reliable year-round harvest. A whole field might not yield too much at one time, but they can be picked just about once a month, and the crop almost never fails. On top of that, it can even fertilize fallow land. It’s thanks to the gabo fruit that the rate of starvation in the city is dropping rapidly.”

What a convenient fantasy crop. That almost seemed like *too* much value.

It may have been secondhand information from an official, but that was still an impressively detailed explanation, Zena.

“However, it can be grown only in walled-in areas, so the food situation in the countryside is apparently still quite rough.”

The orchard’s outer wall was lower than the one surrounding the city—maybe about sixty feet? *I wonder why it has to be walled in? Is it harder to grow outside, or maybe animals would eat it, or the feudal lord’s just monopolizing it?* I found this very puzzling.

“Is there a reason for that?”

“They’re goblins’ favorite food. They’ll come and devour them all in a matter of moments if the fields aren’t protected like this. The fruit can’t be exported outside the city, either.”

Ooh, so there are goblins in this world, too? I’d definitely like to see that. From a safe distance, preferably.

“It seems like there’d be people who’d try to smuggle them out anyway.”

“Well, if they were caught, they’d be sentenced to slavery.”

Yeah, but if there’s a famine, there’d be people who’d risk enslavement anyway and try to smuggle them out.

“Over there is an anti-dragon defense tower.”

Zena was pointing at one of three large towers inside the manor grounds. Only two of them had windmills attached at the top like the one I’d seen from inside the city.

“It seems much bigger and sturdier than the kind inside the city.”

“Yes, it is. There are large Magic Guns installed there from back when they needed to defend against invasions from flying dragons and wyrms, so the tower has to be solid.”

Unfortunately, because of the cannon at the top, civilians couldn’t enter the anti-dragon defense tower.

I had been wondering for a while now: Why wouldn’t they just fight the dragons outside the city instead of here, where there were crops that could easily be ruined by such a thing? Perplexed, I posed the question to Zena.

“These fields were originally prepared specifically to fight against wyverns,” she explained. Apparently, since attacks had become scarce and the fields were falling into disuse, the current count had decided that the area should be used as farmland as well as a manor so it wouldn’t go to waste.

I see—so I had the order backward.

The carriage proceeded along a road that connected the towers. One of them was all but destroyed, crumbling and blackened inside and out. There were a few people taking measurements nearby, so it must have been in the process of repairs.

“Did a wyvern destroy that tower?”

“Oh… No, a lesser dragon destroyed it in an attack about two years ago. Apparently, it took out half the towers in the area, and there was even damage to the castle. We were still able to drive it off, though.”

“Only drive it off?”

“Well, a lesser dragon is still a dragon, after all. Wyverns are one thing, but defeating a dragon is impossible. You’d have to be a great conjurer like the ancestral king Yamato or a hero from the Saga Empire.”

I was tempted to look through my Storage, but I resisted. Zena’s story was still continuing.

“That was enough to scare off the lesser dragon, but forty years ago, when a full-grown black dragon attacked, they couldn’t make a scratch on it. It’s hard to believe, but they say it even destroyed the outer wall! The reason the manor wall is so low is because it was built after that event.”

“Then how did they fend it off? Did a hero step in and defeat it?”

“No… After it had eaten its fill of goats from the farms, it simply flew away on its own. I guess from a dragon’s point of view, human beings are nothing more than ants.”

Were dragons really that strong? Then I wonder if having defeated dragons meant that I could aim for world domination. Not that I had the ambition or drive to do anything like that.

“That’s right—we talked about this a little in the temple, but what exactly makes someone a ‘hero,’ anyway?”

“A hero? Well, apparently there’s a powerful magic technique in the Saga Kingdom called Hero Summoning. I heard that the cost of the summoning is enormous, though, so they use it only during the sixty-six-year cycle of the demon lords’ invasion.

“They say King Yamato and the first emperor of the Saga Kingdom were both heroes called on by the Hero Summoning magic to save the world. Amazing, isn’t it?”

So heroes were summoned here, huh? Maybe they really were Japanese, then. *Yamato* was definitely a Japanese name, and even this emperor “Saga” could be, too. And the reason the swords had names like “Excalibur” and “Claíomh Solais” might be connected to that, too.

At any rate, this “Saga Empire” may just hold the key to getting back to my own world. For now, I wrote a note about it in the networking tab.

“So does this ‘sixty-six-year cycle’ mean you know when a demon lord will attack next?”

“It’s more like a period during which he could attack at any time. But as of now, we haven’t heard anything about one appearing.”

Hmm. I definitely feel like it could’ve happened a while ago, and word just hasn’t gotten around yet.

“Isn’t it possible that a demon lord’s been revived, and the army just hasn’t heard about it?”

“The Shiga Kingdom and the Saga Empire have magical means of conveying urgent information, so even if one came back and destroyed the city, word would still get to us.”

Wow, that’s impressive.

“Besides, before a demon lord appears, the revered priestess at every temple would receive a divine warning called the Oracle, so we would know about it in advance.”

Even more impressive. These gods know what they’re doing!

“The Oracle is delivered before any major disaster, not just a demon lord. But apparently, not a single priestess had a premonition about the starfall two days ago… Perhaps the Oracle didn’t appear because it was on the other side of the barrier to the Valley of Dragons.”

Oh, that wall thing. So maybe it was in a different god’s domain and didn’t qualify for the Oracle or something?

“So a ‘demon lord’ probably has an army of monsters, right?”

“It seems to differ depending on the demon lord. Some have fought on their own, but most of them lead big armies of demons or monsters into battle. They say some have even had human or demi-human armies.”

Huh! So there’s a lot of variety.

“But the most frightening subordinates a demon lord can have are hell demons. Even the lesser ones are as strong as that wyvern we fought the other day.”

“Wow. You’d think ‘lesser’ would mean they’d be weak.”

“Hell demons are troublesome because they can only be harmed by magic or magically imbued weapons.”

“So if there are lesser hell demons, are there also intermediate and greater ones?”

“Yes. They say intermediate hell demons can easily destroy a whole city. Generally, it takes a whole group of knights or royal sorcerers to defeat one. The intermediate hell demons have higher resistance to magic, so weak spells won’t work on them.”

They can destroy an entire city? I feel bad for any hero who has to fight those.

But if that’s the intermediate level, does that mean there are even more powerful ones?

“So what about the greater hell demons?”

“They’re on the same level as a dragon or a demon lord. No human can defeat them. It’s the kind of opponent where you don’t think about how to win against them—just how to minimize your losses or run away.”

Then it’s on par with the fully grown dragon we talked about earlier, I guess.

Huh? Something’s nagging me at the back of my mind… Am I forgetting something? Oh well, I’m sure it’ll come back to me.

“So which is stronger, a demon lord or a dragon?”

“A dragon.”

Wow, that was fast.

“Once, a long time ago, there was a powerful demon lord who even defeated a hero… But he lost the battle against a dragon.”

“Then instead of summoning heroes, shouldn’t they just get a dragon to take care of demon lords?”

“That’s impossible. A dragon might fight demons for fun, but it would never take them down for the sake of humans. And the casualties of a battle between the two would be terrible—worse than the damage from a demon lord alone.”

I see… So it’s like the gods and the heroes have to collaborate to defeat the demon lord before a dragon appears.

With the power of Meteor Shower, I might be on the level of a dragon right now. If a demon lord attacked and the hero fighting him lost, I’d use Meteor Shower to kill him from a distance. I’m way too clumsy to fight one up close.

Too much serious conversation can be exhausting, so as we watched the sheep chewing on grass in the untilled fields, we chatted about our favorite and least favorite foods and such.

After we left the manor, we were planning to go to a well-known restaurant in the plaza in front of the castle, but it was still a bit early for lunch, so we postponed our trip into the inner wall and headed to the west quarter instead.

Apparently, there were alchemy shops there, so I wanted to check one out.

“In addition to stores catering to the not-so-wealthy citizens, there are butchery shops, alchemists, and stores of that sort. There are other things there, too, but…” Zena had gotten embarrassed and stopped there.

From what I saw on the map, there were also pawnshops, moneylenders, and brothels, at the very least. There was even a slave market on this very street. She’d probably been reluctant to talk about those things.

I had better not push the subject, or it might seem like I’m harassing her.

After we passed through an area selling groceries and other basic necessities, we started to see shops of a more dubious nature. Sexy ladies and unsavory-looking men were wandering around.

The plaza in the west quarter had plenty of street stalls, many auctioning off livestock and cattle. On closer inspection, young boys and girls were lined up in cages next to the cattle—slaves. I had seen a fair amount of slaves here already, but this kind of treatment was especially sickening.

I was tempted to buy all of them and set them free, but I was afraid I wouldn’t

be able to look after them in the end.

At the front of the plaza, a merchant-looking man was making announcements about the slave market. Apparently, it would be occurring for three nights, starting tomorrow evening.

Once we left the plaza, a line of brothels greeted us. The scene was strangely reminiscent of a historical drama.

It would definitely be better to do perverted things with a lady in this line of work of her own free will. Why force a slave into it when you could be with a woman who knows her way around the bedroom and actually wants to be there?

I wanna go to a bar with some pretty ladies tonight! I wonder if they have hostess bars here? I'd enjoy talking dirty with a woman rather than take a bubble bath or whatever—Oh, shit. I probably shouldn't be thinking about this when I'm with a girl, even if we're not involved. Sorry, sorry.

Along the outer wall, there were public park areas every few blocks. One of them looked to be full of people.

"Please stop a moment," Zena suddenly commanded the driver, looking into the crowd.

"What's the matter, Zena?"

"Satou, look over there."

Hmm? Isn't that the tubby priest from yesterday?

"Let us punish these children of demons! Cast these sacred stones at them and pave the way to purity!" Amid the noise of the clamoring crowd, I could hear the shrill voice of the priest shouting in a near-falsetto. I guess since he wasn't getting anywhere with his expedition to the east quarter, he was now trying his shtick on his home turf in the west quarter.

Unlike last time, though, it seemed like this crowd was on the verge of rioting. Was this disturbance the "uproar" the priestess had whispered about before?

"Good people of virtue! Do you remember the starfall of a few days past, surely a sign of divine wrath?"

“YES!”

“We remember!”

“YEAH!”

At least half these people are either hired shills or people who just like yelling.

“And there is more! Just yesterday, a servant of the demon lord attacked the count’s castle!”

“OH, LORD!”

“Please send a hero to save us!”

“NOOO!”

Hmm? Did that really happen? I glanced over at Zena and saw a troubled look on her face.

“Someone rushed into the guardroom of the count’s castle yesterday and said there was a black shadow flying around, but none of the watchmen or the other people on the grounds saw it.”

“Maybe they just made it up?”

“I don’t see why anyone would do that. I mean, that person was imprisoned in the castle dungeon for disturbing the peace.”

The laws in this world sure are strict.

“This is proof that the protection of the gods is waning! Good citizens, we must prove our virtue! If we perform enough righteous acts, we will be shielded from the coming storm!”

“Help us, Father!!”

“YEAH!”

“Virtue!!”

These people got worked up way too easily. Where was their sense of skepticism?

“We must accrue proof of our virtue! Do you understand, good citizens? Virtue!”

“VIRTUUUE!”

“YEEEAH!”

“TELL US HOW!!”

Pyramid schemes and telephone scams would be really successful here.

“Look at these creatures!”

The fat priest pointed accusingly at something in the center of the plaza.

“These demi-humans are failed hell demons… No, the spawn of the demon lord himself! Prove your integrity through the good deed of enacting divine justice!”

“YEEEAH!”

“LET’S KILL ’EM!!!”

Whoa, okay—calm down.

“Wait! Pious citizens!! To kill them would be against the laws of this kingdom. We must hold back!”

“Then what do we do, Father?!”

“KILL ’EM!!!”

Yeah, a lot of these guys were just here to yell.

“We cannot kill them—but we can cast these holy stones at the demon spawn!”

“FATHER!!”

“GIVE US THE STONES!!”

“YES!”

I looked where the chubby priest was pointing and saw three beastfolk girls: a cat-eared girl, a dog-eared girl, and a lizard girl chained up in a frightened huddle.

“But it won’t be free! Buying the stones with your own money is righteous indeed!”

“YEEEAH!”

“VIRTUUUE!!”

Oh-ho, not so many this time.

“The stones are one copper each! And to show my generosity, I’ll give you five stones for one large copper!”

The responses stopped. This was a frugal crowd.

“Devout men and women! Why do you hesitate? We have only so many stones, you know! This good deed is first come, first served!”

“I’LL TAKE ONE!”

“Sell ’em to me!”

“YEAH!”

“Form a line!”

Was this chubby priest using mind-control magic or something?

The people who bought the stones wasted no time in throwing them at the beastfolk girls. They weren’t holding back at all, either. *Shit! Are you serious?!*

“I can’t watch this anymore! I’ll be right back. Satou, wait here, please.”

A gallant Zena jumped down from the carriage and dashed into the heart of the commotion. I was so impressed that it took me a moment to react.

“Kill the demi-humans!!”

“YEAH!”

“Punish the demons!”

The reptilian girl was protecting the smaller girls. The crowd around them was heated, but the stones that actually hit the girls were relatively sparse.

I saw one person raising his hand to throw another stone, so I put a penny coin in the palm of my hand and flicked it at him, striking his fingers so that he dropped the rock. I was a little nervous about hitting anyone nearby, but since my “Throwing” skill was so high, I had a feeling I wouldn’t miss.

Alarmed by this and perhaps noticing that the stones in their hands were just

ordinary rocks, the people holding them stopped for a moment. That should buy Zena enough time to protect the girls with magic.

But while it was easy enough to step in this time, there was no real point if it was just going to happen again…

As I stared at the beastfolk kids, an AR display appeared as usual to provide more details about them.

Aha!

I absorbed the information as quickly as I could.

The display had shown me a key fact: the name of the girls' master.

It wasn't the chubby priest. So where *was* this guy? Was he not here at all, and that was why he wasn't intervening? Or maybe—was he the priest's accomplice?!

Lately, I'd been depending on the AR displays alone for my information, but now it was time for the Search Entire Map spell to shine.

I looked up the owner's name on the map. *There he is! At the very edge of the plaza.* The girls' master was a small man, sitting on a wooden crate and watching the commotion in the plaza with a wily grin. I inspected the AR box.

His name was Urs, thirty-nine years old. Skills: "Fraud," "Persuasion," "Intimidation." Owned slaves: "Cat," "Dog," "Lizard."

…Hmm? The slaves were listed only by their race, not their name? Wait, that wasn't important right now. More information! I didn't have enough yet.

Affiliation: “Seiryuu City—lower-class citizen.” Guild: “Street Rats.” …That’s it! I searched the map for Street Rats members.

The guild had fifty-two total members. Ten of them were currently in the plaza, including Urs. Aside from him and the big guy beside him who seemed to be a bodyguard, the other eight appeared to be planted in the crowd.

I marked all the members of the guild, even the ones who weren’t currently present, just in case.

All right, time to make my move!

> Skill Acquired: “Secret Maneuvers”

But I must have been more shaken up by the treatment of the beastfolk slaves than I’d realized, because I overlooked a key fact. I couldn’t turn back time, but if I had thought a little longer before taking this first step, maybe the outcome would’ve been different.

Zena seemed to have reached the chubby priest.

“Stop this inhumane treatment at once!”

“What was that, little girl? Are you an ally of the hell demons, too?!”

“Ally”? What happened to “spawn”? And he used a loaded question to make it hard for her to respond. This guy really is an expert agitator.

“Those who align themselves with demons are demons themselves!”

“YEAH!”

While Zena bought me time, I had to do something about the shills planted among the crowd.

“Don’t try to deceive these people! Does Zaicuon Temple intend to break the law?!”

“What wrong is there in casting holy stones at these foul beastfolk?” This conversation was getting nowhere—or maybe the priest was deliberately dodging the subject.

I climbed down from the carriage and pushed into the throng, making my way with the combination of my “Evasion” skill and years of experience with crowded

trains.

“GET ’EM!”

“Let’s throw the stones at her, too!!”

“YEAH!”

It looked like Zena had already cast Wind Protection in advance. The spell protected not only her but the beastfolk kids as well. Leave it to a magic soldier from the count’s army.

Now I had to break this up before the crowd turned into a mob. Even Zena would be in trouble if a huge group closed in on her.

I moved toward a man who was stirring up everyone around him even as he kept throwing stones. To neutralize him, I maxed out the level of my “Hand-to-Hand Combat” skill. Thanks to that, I suddenly knew how best to knock them unconscious without killing someone.

I incapacitated the man with one blow.

It was just an instant’s movement, so the people around us didn’t take any notice. I pretended to be a friend concerned that the man was going through a bout of anemia and carried him to the edge of the plaza, dumping him in an alleyway. I didn’t have enough time to restrain him, so I just left him there.

> Skill Acquired: “Acting”

> Skill Acquired: “Abduction”

> Skill Acquired: “Assassination”

The “Abduction” skill seemed like it might be useful for this, so I maxed it out. I didn’t want the “Assassination” skill, though. No thank you!

In the center of the plaza, a young man in the garb of a different temple had come to Zena’s aid. “The only one claiming that demi-humans are kin to demons is the Zaicuon Temple—no, only *you*!”

“Ah, the head of the ever-philanthropic Garleon Temple. If you’re so fond of the beasts, you’re welcome to use them however you’d like once we’re through punishing them!”

Gross… This guy is seriously the worst. I was surprised to see that Zena hadn't turned bright red. Maybe she didn't realize what he meant? Good.

"Kill them!!"

"Punish the demon spawn!"

"Yeah!"

I left the dramatic standoff to Zena and the new priest. I had some pest control to do.

I knocked out another Street Rat and then another, stowing them away in nearby alleys. Taking an extra second, I planted beer bottles near their hands for effect.

"Do you realize what you're doing? If you keep working up their anxiety and turn this crowd into a mob, the Zaicuon Temple will be held responsible for treason!"

"Hmph—you're nothing but a foolish lizard, playing at borrowing the power of dragons! You're telling me not to kill the demons? Doesn't that make you a traitor yourself?!"

"Kill the demons!"

"That girl must be one in disguise!!"

"Get 'em!"

I'd taken out about half of them by now.

The yells from the crowd had died down significantly, too. There was one guy left who was still shouting loudly, but he didn't seem to be a member of the Street Rats. I marked him for now.

I'd have a chat with him after I finished my purge.

"People of the west quarter! All of us feel the same unease. But we must not become cowards who punish the weak out of fear!"

"Do you hear that? The Garleon priest condemns you all as evil! He condemns you for seeking out virtue!"

The crowd roared in response to the fat priest's incendiary words, but not as

loudly as before.

“Kill the demons!”

“That priest’s a fraud!!”

“Yeah!”

All right, two to go. I took them down easily and rolled them into an alley.

But before bringing Urs onto the stage, there was one last bit of preparation to do: I had to contact the man who was still yelling loudly in the plaza.

> Skill Acquired: “Scheming”

“Please end this already. No matter how many stones you throw, I’ll stop them all!”

“How dare you get in the way of our sacred deed?! You are a fool to defy our god!” the fat priest shrieked, but the replies from the crowd were scarcer than ever. And the remaining voices were disappearing one after the other.

I crept up behind Urs and tapped him on the shoulder. “It’s your turn now.”

“Wh-who the hell are you?! Oi, Banze! Come crush this twerp!” Startled, Urs jerked his chin toward the large man behind him. But unfortunately for him, when he turned around, his bodyguard was nowhere to be found.

“Banze? Where did that half-wit go?!”

“If you mean the big guy, he went off somewhere with a woman.” In reality, I had just knocked him out and left him in the back streets.

Without further ado, I kicked Urs in the solar plexus with my toe, causing him to faint in agony, then dragged him into the plaza.

“Everyone, please break this up! If this continues, the count’s army really will come to stop you. If you’re worried, come to the temple instead! We’ll listen to your fears.”

“Are you trying to defy God’s will?! You godless fool!”

Uh, both of you are priests, though.

I tossed the unconscious Urs down between them.

“Lord Urs?! Why, you! What have you done to this faithful follower who offered up his slaves?! You apostate!”

Okay, I’m just gonna ignore the fat priest.

“Sorry I took so long, Zena. And thank you for your work, too, Sir Priest. This is the man behind this scheme.”

“Amazing, Satou! Your agility really is the best thing about you!” *I’m not sure if that’s really a compliment, Zena.*

“This man is the culprit?” the young priest asked quizzically. I nodded at him with a smile. I had some things to do before I could stop and introduce myself.

“Zena, do you have enough power left to make my voice reach the whole plaza?”

“Yes! … ■■■■ ■■■■ ■■■■ ■■■■ ***Whisper Wind*** *Kaze no Sasayaki!*”

I lifted up the unconscious Urs for the crowd. His body doubled as cover so I wouldn’t be too conspicuous myself.

“Can you see him, everyone? This is the man behind the curtain! He loaned his slaves to the Zaicuon Temple to prey on your fears and fool you all into buying a bunch of ordinary pebbles with your hard-earned money!”

> Skill Acquired: “Judgment”

“Give us our money baaack!” cried one noticeably loud voice from within the crowd. Rallied by this, the people in the plaza began a chant of “Give it back! Give it back!”

“And he had an even deeper motive! On top of making a quick buck with this priest, his real goal was to provoke all of you into rebelling against the count. This man is the real demon worshipper!”

My “Fabrication” skill is working great!

The part about making money was probably true, at least. The rest of it was a stretch. To be honest, I didn’t really know yet what his goal had been—I was just embellishing for good measure.

> Skill Acquired: “False Accusation”

If their goal was just to make money, it wouldn't make a lot of sense. Even if they sold one hundred "holy stones," they'd make only five silver coins. That wouldn't even make up for the cost of the three slaves; according to my "Estimation" skill, they were worth at least six silver coins. And if things had gone on that way for much longer, those girls would have died.

Right? It just didn't add up.

"Was this man controlling the hell demons from the shaaadows?!"

That was the loud man from earlier. I had asked him to yell things to turn people against the chubby priest, but I felt like he was missing the point a bit. Saying stuff like that might just freak people out and cause another riot.

Hmm? Hell demons?

That's right… Now I remember!

When I first came to this city…

"Heh-heh-heh…"

Still held aloft with his arms pinned behind him, Urs laughed in a strange, stuffy voice. He shouldn't have been able to move at all, but suddenly, *two black arms* shot out to attack.

The poisonous talons tore through the body of the chubby priest.

…I'd noticed a single hell demon was already living here.

The head priest of Zaicuon Temple died instantly, his vital organs ripped to shreds. I couldn't even react to the brutal murder taking place before my eyes.

"What the hell…are these…?"

The violent black arms with their sharp claws were sprouting from somewhere around Urs's chest. Down on one knee on the ground, he coughed up blood as he stared at his own chest in dumbfounded amazement.

"A hell demon! Everyone, leave the plaza at once!" The young priest was the first to get ahold of himself and shout a warning to the people in the area, backing away from the poisonous claws. Then he began to chant an incantation in a strong baritone.

The people still in the plaza took one look at the appendages sprouting from Urs's chest and fled in all directions. The evil clawed arms seemed to have a will of their own, a separate entity from Urs, and they tried to attack in our direction—but Urs had dropped to the ground and sat frozen in shock, so they couldn't reach.

"Satou, grab those girls and get them out of here! I'm going to find help!"

"R-right!"

Embarrassingly enough, it wasn't until Zena shouted orders at me that I finally came to my senses and realized what I had to do.

First, I had to get the beastfolk girls out of harm's way. Otherwise, what was the point in taking on that fathead priest? I ran over and put all my strength into trying to break their chains; instead, the stake they were bound to popped out of the ground. Not exactly what I'd planned, but at least they should be able to move now.

"It's not safe here—you have to run away! I can't get your chains off, so you'll have to move together and try to hide in the shadows of a sturdy building."

But the three girls didn't move an inch. It looked like there was another reason they couldn't move.

"He gave us an order…so we can't…," the cat-eared girl mumbled in a trembling voice devoid of all hope.

"He told us not to move."

"I'm terribly sorry. Our master, Urs, told us not to move from this spot… If we disobey, our enslavement collars will tighten completely. Please, forget about us and go."

The dog-eared girl and the scalefolk girl, whose back was bleeding, shook their heads almost apologetically.

At that moment, help came from an unexpected source.

"Charge! Defeat the hell demon!"

The same people who'd been chucking "holy stones" at the beastfolk girls were now throwing them at Urs and the arms sprouting from his chest. The man

shouting the orders was the loudmouthed guy I'd bought over to my side earlier.

With a crack, Urs's neck twisted at an unnatural angle. Instinctively, I looked away.

They sure value lives cheaply in this world. To think they'd try to kill the demon, Urs and all, without a moment's hesitation…

Maybe I'm just too much of a pacifist.

"Ah! The demon's getting up! Everybody hide!"

I turned my head upon hearing the loud man's shout, and I saw that what had been the crumpled corpse of Urs was rising back up without bending its limbs, like a video being rewound. He looked like a zombie.

Black mist oozed out of Urs's body. I glanced over at the young priest, but he was still in the middle of his chant. *That incantation is way too long.*

"You worms… You're doing me a favor by smashing up my host's head. I, grateful!"

Maybe it was just because of the strange way the demon spoke, but for whatever reason, I didn't feel as afraid as I probably should have been.

"… ■■■■ ■■■■ ***Circle of Anti-Evil*** *Fuuma no Enjin!"*

"How clever. I, amused!"

The young priest finally finished invoking his spell, creating a circle of light that sealed in the demon. Despite his snickering, it didn't seem like the creature could escape the magic circle. Without pause, the young priest started a second chant.

"Grrr… Cannot use magic with a human's voice! I, frustrated."

The people on the street peered nervously in our direction from the shadows of nearby buildings. Tearing through Urs's body, the real form of the hell demon emerged.

He was a strange creature, like a large eyeball that had sprouted arms and wings. Just looking at him was chipping away at my sanity stat.

"Hur-hur-hur-hur. There, can speak more easily now. I, delighted!"

This way was actually even harder to understand.

And the thing didn't seem to have a mouth, so where was he even speaking from? Was he making the giant eyeball vibrate like a speaker or something?

…Wait, that's not important at all.

This had to be the "disaster" the Oracle predicted. The riot from earlier was just an opening act.

I turned toward the demon. His AR label had changed from **Urs** to **Lesser Hell Demon**. His name was there, too, but in phonetic symbols instead of normal characters.

Without taking my eyes off him, I checked and saw that the beastfolk girls were now **Masterless** after Urs's death. *Doesn't that mean the kids can move now?*

"… ■■■ ***Sacred Javelin*** *Seinaru Yari!"*

A javelin of light flew from the young priest.

"I, amused!"

The fiend howled, and an inky-black barrier formed around him, diverting the path of the javelin. So not only could he speak now, but he really could use magic, too.

With another howl, the demon destroyed the magic circle at his feet.

"All that panic…the anxiety and fear…the prejudice and conceit… It suits my needs perfectly! I, content!"

This is bad. If he attacks with magic now, I won't be able to protect these kids.

Should I try to beat him to the punch? But if I didn't defeat him in one blow, I'd be putting the girls in more danger.

I heard another cry from the monster, this one noticeably longer and louder.

"And thus, will now create a nesting hole in this ground for my lord. He will be most pleased! I, hardworking!"

His "lord"? Don't tell me he means a demon lord?!

A dark circle of magic spread out with the eyeball demon at its center. *Shit. This is definitely some kind of attack magic.* I picked up the three girls in my

arms, ready to make a break for it. The young priest, too, carried an elderly person as he ran for safety.

At that moment, with the worst timing possible, Zena returned leading a group of soldiers from the count's army.

"Satou! I brought reinforcements!"

I could see steam rising from Zena's skin; she must have run like crazy. Judging by how fast they'd arrived, this group had probably been sent to suppress the riot the fat priest had been stirring up. Their metal armor clanking loudly, the army detachment readied their huge shields to try to surround the hell demon.

"Zena, wait! He's is casting some kind of spell! Stay back!"

I hesitated for a moment between whether to repeat my warning to Zena or to carry the kids immediately to safety, but I never had a chance to decide.

The ground under my feet warped like an effect from some old movie. Though still solid, it suddenly glowed a dark violet, bent, twisted around, and pulled us under. In a flash, the world around me was plunged into darkness.

◆

When my vision returned, we were in some sort of cave. A faint purple glow rising from the ground meant I could more or less see. Though the ground was still mostly the same, everything else around me was made of sheer rock. There was a single exit in one of the walls of the thirty-square-foot space.

The only other people in this place besides me were the three beastfolk girls still held in my arms. No Zena, of course, and no sign of the eyeball demon. The troops she'd brought were nowhere to be seen, either.

"Welcome to my lord's labyrinth. It has no name yet, but it will soon produce demons to play with you. You should be grateful! I, diligent!"

The voice echoed from some unknown source. It didn't seem to be telepathy, but…?

The cat-eared girl was pointing up at a corner of the ceiling. Apparently, the voice was coming from an air hole up there.

"Now amuse me with all your fear! Kill each other! Steal from each other! I,

pleased!” The demon paused for a moment before speaking again. “… Resignation will hollow out your souls. I, disgusted!

“Thus, have made it so all the rooms are connected to the exit. I, fair!

“Looking forward to the moment your hope gives way to despair. Fight to survive, you worms! I, excited!”

…I see.

So this is the start of the “Escape from the Labyrinth!” *mandatory mission, huh?*

> Title Acquired: Labyrinth Explorer

Labyrinth

Satou here. I think I first took an interest in getting into the gaming business when I was a kid and got obsessed with one of my dad's games, a dungeon-crawler where you explored a labyrinth. I'll never forget my excitement when I found an ultrarare sword in that game.

Checking the map, I saw our location was now marked as **Demon's Labyrinth: Bottom Floor**, with no displayed paths.

…I guess I knew it wouldn't be that easy.

Still, this transition from a light city adventure to a sudden dungeon encounter had been way too sudden; if this were a tabletop RPG, I'd be worried about the game master's mental health right about now.

…Oh dear. More important, the beastfolk kids seemed pretty scared. I should check in with them first. *Might as well start with introductions, right?*

"My name is Satou. I'm a peddler."

"Cat!"

"I'm Dog, sir."

"And I am Lizard."

Are those really their names?

Their previous masters, not just Urs, had called them that. The dog-eared and cat-eared girls had been slaves since they were little, but apparently, the scalefolk girl had been enslaved as an adult, so she had a name at least. But it sounded like a raspy, scraping sound, so I couldn't pronounce it.

In the end, they wanted me to give them names that would be easy to say, so I decided to call them Pochi, Tama, and Liza. I half expected them to get mad at being given such pet-like names, but I was pretty confident that if I gave them normal ones, I'd immediately get them mixed up. I figured this would at least

work until we got out of the labyrinth.

Liza didn't actually come from *lizard* but from the first two syllables of her mostly unpronounceable real name. And Pochi and Tama are popular names in Japan for dogs and cats, respectively.

Now then—before our escape began, some first aid was in order.

I took out some towels and the Well Bag, plus the shells that held that salve. I had picked these up as souvenirs for Martha and the others, but I could always buy more once I got out of here.

"Use these towels and the Well Bag water to disinfect any open wounds. Then you can put on this salve and wrap them in cloth. Don't use the same cloth you cleaned them with, though."

I handed some new towels to the three of them, but they just looked perplexed. Right… Whenever I tried to talk to them normally, at least at first, they got confused unless I used a more commanding tone. It was like I was babysitting my younger relatives all over again.

"What's wrong? Don't worry—I'll look the other way while you're doing it."

But apparently, it wasn't so much that they were being shy—it was just unusual for slaves to be given high-quality towels and salves and the like, so they were taken aback.

"Thank you, sir. You don't need to look the other way, sir."

"What pretty cloth. I'm so happy!"

"Um…young master, mightn't it be better to hold on to such things…water and medicine, that is…for your own use…?"

Pochi and Tama undressed without hesitation, untying the hemp cord around their sack dresses and beginning the first aid treatment. If it weren't for their ears and tails, they'd be indistinguishable from normal human children.

Pochi had bobbed brown hair, while Tama's hair was short, white, and choppy. Liza's waist-length red hair was tied near the bottom. She was still hesitant, perhaps the type to overthink, but when I phrased it as an order, she began to use the supplies like the other two.

Liza, too, would have looked like a normal female human if she didn't have such a splendid tail and orange scales that covered part of her body. The scales extended a ways from her tail as well as from her neck to her shoulders, her elbows to her fingertips, and her knees to her toes. From what I could tell through her clothes, her chest was pretty flat.

When it seemed enough time had passed for them to finish their first aid, I turned back and offered them some baked goods. They were the honeyed pastries I'd bought as souvenirs when I was walking around with Zena. They were only about the size of my palm, though, and I had just three for each girl. Still, it should be enough to fill their stomachs for a while.

Pochi was visibly drooling as she looked at the pastries, but none of them moved to eat anything. So they needed permission to eat? Slavery was even worse than I'd thought.

"No need to hold back. Just go ahead and eat them."

"Yummyyy!"

"It's so sweet and tast—"

Pochi started choking, so I handed her the Well Bag.

"Take your time, okay? I won't ask for them back or anything."

This was weirdly like being a babysitter.

"Baked pastries made with honey… I…" Liza was at a loss for words. *That seems like a bit of an overreaction for a handful of pastries.*

I looked at the map again, but it still didn't show anything outside this room.

Maybe magic didn't work here, or its effects were limited somehow.

I opened my menu and selected the Search Entire Map spell. If that didn't work, I was going to have to carefully map this all out myself.

That concern was quickly put to rest. When I used the spell, the entire Demon's Labyrinth was immediately revealed to me. The combination of this magic and my map was just entirely too convenient. *What is this, easy mode?*

Though I could see every path in the dungeon, it was difficult to understand

the labyrinth's layout from the 2-D display, so I switched over to 3-D. In war games like *WW*, the land's height variations could become a major factor, so 3-D maps were indispensable.

The map could even be rotated now, so I looked at it from various angles. From this vantage point, the place seemed less like a labyrinth than an ant farm. The paths branched out like the roots of a tree to form various rooms, then diverged back into more pathways.

There were areas that crossed through multiple levels and shortcuts connecting other rooms, too. It was all decidedly dungeon-like.

By my estimates, about 159 people were in the labyrinth. Seven of these were demi-humans, and the other 152 were humans, with about a quarter of the total being slaves. The troops sent to suppress the riot consisted of about 50 people, split up into three groups.

It looked like Zena was in one of those groups, too. Going by the map, it didn't seem likely that we'd run into each other, but she should be all right if she was with her fellow soldiers.

If anything, I wished they'd come to *my* rescue.

The young Garleon priest was even farther away from me than Zena. If we were going to come together, it would most likely be near the exit. He seemed like a capable person who I'd prefer not to die, but he also could probably take care of himself, so I guess I'd just count myself lucky if we ran into each other.

If only I could contact them somehow, I could lead everyone to the surface. Somehow, a player chat function wasn't among all the usually useful features of the menu.

For some reason, though, the eyeball demon didn't show up in my map search. There was one room that was particularly deep in the heart of the dungeon, so I figured maybe he'd be there, but…

It definitely wouldn't be fun if I stupidly beat him too early only to have the whole labyrinth collapse because he'd been defeated, so I'd leave him alone, too.

Most of the enemies seemed to be bug-type demons from levels 10 to 20. When I first searched the map, there were only about twenty of them, but each time I searched again, there were more, and by then it had reached around a hundred. More varieties were appearing, too, such as frogs and snakes. Each had the title Primitive Demon. Did this mean they'd been made when the dungeon was generated? I didn't think the wyvern I saw before had a title like that.

This room was a dead end with only one exit; it'd be bad if we got attacked as we tried to proceed. *Should I give these three weapons, too? Okay, I'll just pretend I found them in the shadows of a passageway and give them some spears or javelins out of Storage.*

Once I started heading toward the first passage, the three girls panicked and chased after me.

"Don't abandon us! We'll do anything, sir!"

"Don't leave us here!"

“Young master, please bring us with you, even if just to use me as a shield. I beg of you…”

They were imploring me desperately, yet none of them attempted to grab at my clothes. Was this because of their experience, or training, as slaves?

“I’m sorry I scared you. I was just going to try to take a better look at the passageway. I won’t desert you, so don’t worry.” I spoke as gently as possible. I was pretty sure they’d be upset even if I told them not to be, but I still felt it was better to say it than not.

As I waited for the three girls to finish eating, I took out a short sword and the Magic Gun from my bag and equipped them. The latter was about the size of a handgun, and it fired magic as bullets instead of lead. I could also adjust how much magic it used without limitations, even if I wanted to fire the smallest bullets possible for just one MP each, so its cost performance was highly effective.

In my case, my MP regenerated at a rate of about three points a second, so I essentially had unlimited ammo. It reminded me of the early days of FPS weapons, but since there was a tenth of a second’s delay when I pulled the trigger, it was a bit difficult to use.

Of the three beastfolk, the only one with any combat skills was Liza, who had the “Spear” skill. I couldn’t very well just pull a spear out of my bag, though, so I gave her a short sword for now. She hesitated a little—maybe it was unusual to give a slave a weapon—but I insisted.

I went ahead as the advance guard and put Liza in back to take care of any surprise attacks from behind, despite her protests that she could go in front. *I have the radar, so there won’t be any surprise attacks, but I bet having a role assigned will make her feel a little better.*

So the marching order was me, Tama, Pochi, then Liza. I firmly commanded them not to jump into battle unless I told them to do so. They were only around level 2 or 3, so if they took a hit from a monster, it’d probably kill them.

I guess this was an escort mission now.

The passageway walls were made up of the same stone as the floor. There was

no more luminescence from below, so it was quite dark. Luckily, there were glowing stone pillars every couple of feet, so while the shadows of the cave were certainly disconcerting, walking wasn't a problem.

The posts were about waist height, but the light reached only as far as my chest, so it was unfortunately impossible to see the ceiling. This was probably a deliberate design to cause more anxiety. How very pleasant.

Maybe they were there because if the passageways were completely dark, we would just want to stay in the rooms and hide.

"Tama, if you see anything ahead of us on the path, please tell me quietly. Pochi, let me know if you notice any strange smells or noises. And Liza, I'm counting on you to watch our backs. Just don't get so occupied with it that you fall behind."

"Okies!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Understood!"

They still seemed anxious, but their responses were solid.

> Skill Acquired: "Direction"

> Skill Acquired: "Organization"

Hmm. These must be party-related skills. They looked useful, so I distributed some skill points to each of them.

Relevant knowledge about arranging and deploying party members appeared in my mind. Apparently, I could check and revise their relative positions, too.

As we continued through the passage, an enemy appeared on my radar. It was still a fair distance away from us.

Poking her head out into the darkness of the passageway and sniffing a few times, Pochi made her report. "I smell blood from up ahead, sir."

The distance in a straight line wasn't that far, but along the curves of the passage it must have been about a third of a mile. I patted Pochi on the head, praising her sharp nose. It felt a little weird to treat her like a pet, but her tail

was wagging enthusiastically, so she seemed happy.

As we drew closer, I checked the enemy's info on the map. It was level 20, with no special abilities; its attacks were "Tackle" and "Bite." There was only one, and it was in the next room.

Something occurred to me, and I made a note of the three girls' statuses. I was surprised to find that there was an EXP field in their info. *Seriously, is this a game?* Their experience was shown in percentages, so I couldn't get a concrete number, but it was convenient to know how close they were to their next level.

I couldn't see the EXP bars of any other people on the map. Was it limited to my party members? Or was there some other condition involved?

A light escaping from the next room came into view. I told the other three to wait, and I peered into the space. A giant insect enemy, which apparently hadn't noticed me, was eating…something. *Ugh…* Like I said, I have a very low tolerance for blood and gore.

If I lose, is it going to eat me like that, too? Given the differences in our levels, it was hard to see how I could lose, but that didn't make me feel much better.

How do the protagonists of stories and legends fight crap like that without freaking out?

The smell of blood, wafting downwind to me, made my gutless heart weak. *Maybe we can just hole up in the room we came from and wait for help to arrive.*

"Young master, forgive my arrogance, but I wonder if we couldn't perhaps sneak past the monster while it eats its prey, or else use the element of surprise to attack it from behind?" Timidly, Liza offered her thoughts. Surely she was afraid, too. In fact, I could see that her slender limbs were shaking.

Even the girls with their single-digit levels are trying to figure out what we can do to move forward, and here I am with my tail between my legs. How did I think anyone would find us and come to our aid, anyway?

I definitely couldn't do close-quarters combat, but maybe I could just fire from a distance with my Magic Gun. My magic was strong enough to pulverize huge rocks, so it should be enough to take down this giant monster, too.

I blocked out the sound of chewing and fired at it with the gun—at maximum power, of course.

My first shot missed, but the bug monster didn't notice that it was under attack. Just like when I had shot the rock before, I still hadn't received a "Shooting" skill.

The magic bullets glowed, so I could see their trajectory in the dark room. The creature noticed me after the second shot, but once I adjusted my aim, I was able to hit it with my third just as it scuttled around to face me.

Since the gun was on its highest power setting, the bullet tore the creature's hind legs from its joints. Before it could get an inch closer, I took down the giant camel-cricket monster with a rapid-fire barrage.

It was such a complete victory that my worrying from just moments ago seemed ridiculous.

> Skill Acquired: "Shooting"

> Skill Acquired: "Sniping"

> Skill Acquired: "Aim"

> Title Acquired: Bug Killer

I thought camel crickets only lived in the desert, giant or otherwise…

"Super amazing, sir!"

"So strong!"

It was all thanks to the Magic Gun, so receiving compliments felt a little uncomfortable. Pochi and Tama were in high spirits, but it looked like something was still troubling Liza.

"That's a very strangely shaped wand, young master. You can use magic with it?"

"This is a magic weapon. Just don't tell anyone, okay?" I warned them for now. Liza nodded meekly, but Pochi and Tama replied with such an enthusiastic "'kaaay!" that I made a note to go over this with them again once we got out of the labyrinth.

The bottom segments of the creature's detached limbs looked to be the perfect shape for a staff or a spear. They weren't anything like normal insect legs—they seemed almost artificial. *Maybe I can create a makeshift spear out of this?*

I used the Magic Gun to detach the rod-shaped part of a hind leg. The clawed end felt a little loose, so I pulled out a slim block of wood and a leather strap from my bag and used them to fix it in place. Green liquid was leaking out the end, so I wrapped it in the same cloth we'd used to clean wounds earlier.

> Skill Acquired: "Disassembly"

> Skill Acquired: "Entomology"

> Skill Acquired: "Demonology"

> Skill Acquired: "Weapon Crafting"

> Skill Acquired: "Leather Crafting"

> Skill Acquired: "Woodworking"

As usual, these seemed way too easy to obtain.

The spear I'd just built looked like it would fall apart from a single stab, so this time I maxed out my new "Weapon Crafting" skill and used it to make a new one. The knowledge granted by "Entomology" and "Demonology" told me to cut a notch into the hind leg with my short sword and snap it off.

Ew, that felt gross.

I shaved down the remaining leg with the short sword. This seemed to be a magic weapon, too, because its sharp edge was far better than what I'd seen used in the count's army.

Last time, I'd bound the end with leather and wood, but this time I'd be using another piece of the monster itself. I could use its own tissue to bind it together, and the pieces would fuse automatically thanks to the creature's powerful regeneration abilities. I wasn't sure how or why this worked when the monster was already dead, but when I tried it out, the knowledge granted by my new skills was dead-on: The tissues fused into place.

Just to be sure, I tied a leather strap around it for reinforcement.

This still felt weirdly surreal and gamelike, but since this spear was far superior to the first one I'd rigged together, I guess I had nothing to complain about.

I turned to offer the completed camel-cricket spear to Liza, only to find that she was hard at work with her short sword on the spot that connected the creature's head to its back.

…What, is she hungry?

"Liza, if you eat that, you'll get a stomachache for sure."

"Er…I'm not going to eat it. If this is a demon, it should have a core, so I thought I'd try to retrieve it…"

Core? "What's a core?"

"Basically, it's money. All monsters and demons have a core at their center, and if you give it to a peddler, you can exchange it for various things."

Liza's response wasn't quite what I'd been looking to hear, but I guess I shouldn't have expected her to just rattle off information like a wiki. I watched as she pulled out a sphere covered in emerald-green blood. It was red, about the size of a fist. The color was really cloudy, though, so it certainly couldn't serve as a jewel.

When Liza returned with the spear, I handed her a small jute bag from my satchel. I also pulled out a used piece of cloth to wipe off the blood.

"Put the core in this bag for now. Oh, and use this spear."

I handed off the bag to Pochi and gave the spear to Liza. The short sword she'd been using went to Tama instead. *Switching equipment like this definitely makes me feel like I'm in an RPG.*

The short sword proved to be a bit too much for Tama to hold. The manacles attached to her collar were probably in the way. *Oh, maybe we can cut them off now.*

I called Liza over and had her pull the chains taut, then used the Magic Gun's lowest power setting to shoot them off. Then I did the same for Pochi and Tama…but their ears had flattened with fear, so I pet their heads gently and apologized.

I put their shackles in a bag and handed it to Pochi along with the bagged core.

“Liza, starting with the next enemy, I’ll have Pochi and Tama take turns retrieving the cores, so please teach them how to do it.”

“Yes, understood.”

“Okay, sir!”

“’kay!”

They all seem pretty motivated, so that’s good, at least.

Also, something else had been bothering me. “Oh, and Pochi…”

“Yes, sir?”

“You don’t need to go out of your way to add ‘sir’ to everything, you know.”

“But if I forget it, I’ll be punished, sir.”

“I see…” I had thought she was just being polite, but she was doing it because she felt she had to? *I’m just their temporary master, so I don’t need to correct her.* “Well, I won’t get angry if you don’t use it, so do whatever you’d like.”

“Okay…sir.”

I pressed my hands together and said a little prayer for the monster’s victim, wishing him happiness in his next life. I also made a note of the deceased’s name before we left the room.

I compared the girls’ stats to before, but aside from a slight decrease in stamina, nothing seemed to have changed; their EXP hadn’t gone up at all. *So they can’t get experience just by being in my party, huh? Then how do the members of supply units and priests and such raise their levels?*

If they could level up, I wouldn’t stand out too much during our escape, even if more people joined us. But I guess that would have been too easy.

Well, since this is like a game, why don’t I try approaching it the same way?

“Tama, if you find any rocks about the size of that core, please pick them up.”

“’kay!”

Not long after, the path diverged into two. It looked like both ways ultimately

connected to the same room, but one of the paths had another chamber along the way. We would run into monsters no matter which route we chose, but in the additional area on the second path, there was a pair of level 10 hornworm monsters. And a little farther down, there were a few survivors.

…I guess we should save them, huh?

"The paths fork here, meow," Tama reported once the crossroads came into view. *No need to start with the weird speaking quirks now.* I patted her head; she seemed pleased.

Now Pochi looked envious, so I gave her a quick pat, too. Both of them came up to only my chest, so it was easy enough. They were about three and a half feet, maybe? And Liza was taller than me—about five five.

"Let's take the path on the right."

We proceeded along the passageway. According to my radar, I should be seeing a monster by now…

"There's a bug above us, sir," Tama reported. *Now she's imitating Pochi?*

And how was I supposed to defeat an enemy I couldn't see?

…Oh, I know! I'm not sure if this is gonna work, but let's try it out.

I used the radar to figure out roughly where it was and looked in that direction. Moments later, an AR box popped up to display the monster's name and level.

Perfect! I fired indiscriminately at that general area, keeping the Magic Gun's power setting at its lowest. One of them must have hit, because the hornworm monster dropped to the ground.

"Tama, throw a stone at it!"

Tama hurled three rocks at the monster. Two of them hit and bounced off, with only one of them causing damage.

The hornworm slowly inched closer.

"Pochi, Tama, get back. Liza, come up here. Stay behind me, but hit it once with your spear!"

The hornworm attempted a tackle, and I warded it off with my weakest kick to

buy some time. It felt sort of like kicking a rubber ball.

Liza used that opening to strike the monster with the butt end of the spear; the tip wasn't totally secure, so that seemed like the safest bet for now. Still, it did a little bit of damage.

With that taken care of, I fired the Magic Gun a few more times to finish off the creature.

Come to think of it, unlike back in the Valley of Dragons, the corpses of my fallen foes didn't automatically disappear into my Storage. The spoils of war had all shown up when I beat the final lizardman that time, so maybe I had to clear out all the enemies for that to happen or something.

"Liza, Tama, I'll have you recover the core. Pochi, you come with me—there's one more ahead."

Tama handed a bunch of stones to Pochi for throwing. *Tama…how many stones did you pick up, exactly?*

The monster in the next room was the same kind as the one we'd just beaten. Lying on the floor were two corpses, a young woman and a boy who looked like a slave. Unlike with the camel cricket, these victims weren't being eaten.

"Pochi, once we go in, throw rocks at the monster from its side. When you run out, get back to Liza and Tama."

I breezily entered the room and started shooting. Just as I'd instructed, Pochi followed and threw a couple of stones at the creature. Both of them hit their target, but then the hornworm turned toward her and started to spit venom.

Pochi's predicament struck me with a thrill of horror, but I moved quickly and managed to kick the side of the hornworm's head, changing its trajectory. I'd put more force behind the attack than I intended, though, because it crushed the monster's head, and the thing stopped moving. The feeling on the sole of my foot was kind of disgusting.

The venom didn't hit Pochi, but it seemed to have scared her, because she ran off into the passageway—but it was the wrong one. She must have mixed them up in her panic.

“Pochi, stop!”

I chased after her, delayed slightly by going around the dead hornworm.

“Wah! Stay away, stay away!”

Huh? Who was that? That wasn’t Pochi’s voice. Was it the man I’d seen on the map in the passageway?!

I checked the radar. He was way too close.

“Pochi, get back here!” I dashed up behind her and grabbed the back of her neck, lifting her. I thought I saw the back of a man running away down the curved passage, but before I could chase him, his dot disappeared from the radar.

Why did he run in the first place? Did he think Pochi was a monster?

Or maybe he felt some kind of guilt toward the two victims in the other room…?

At any rate, this labyrinth seemed to be a more treacherous place than I’d thought. I’d have to be more careful about these kids’ safety.

“Young master! Are you all right?”

“Awriiight?”

Liza and Tama came running up to us.

“Yeah, we’re fine. Let’s go back to that last room and get the core.”

“I’m sorry, sir.” Pochi’s ears were flat as she apologized, and her tail had retreated between her legs. I wasn’t upset about her blunder, but if she panicked again, her life could be in danger, so I had to reprimand her a little.

“Pochi, if things get dangerous like they did back there, it’s all right to run away. But you can’t lose your head, okay?”

“…Yes, sir.”

Pochi’s head lowered in gloomy contemplation, so I patted her lightly to cheer her up.

> Skill Acquired: “Animal Taming”

“Animal”? That was pretty rude. Couldn’t it be “Child Education” or something?

When we returned to the room, the sight of Liza and Tama disassembling the corpse of the giant hornworm was pretty surreal.

I noted the names of the two victims, but I couldn’t decide whether I should check the bodies to see if they had anything useful. I couldn’t quite bring myself to touch them, but as I stood hesitating, Liza took charge and told Pochi to investigate.

“Should I take off their clothes, too?”

“Just the shoes. Leave the rest.” I didn’t see why we’d need their clothes. But I’d been bothered for some time that the beastfolk girls didn’t have shoes, so I had her recover those.

Pochi brought me the items she’d gathered. The slave boy didn’t have anything, but she had found a change purse and some rings and necklaces and other jewelry on the girl’s body.

I made a folder in Storage for Belongings of the Deceased, then a subfolder for her name, where I stored the items. If there was a grieving family, I could return these to them. After a moment’s thought, I took a lock of their hair from each and put it in with the other things.

I gave the shoes to Pochi and Tama to wear. Liza had the best constitution of the three, so I’d have to ask her to wait a little longer.

The shoes of the young man we’d seen before were probably lying around in the room ahead with the giant snake, so I didn’t think she’d need to wait too long.

My experiment with having the girls hit the monsters, however weak the attacks might be, seemed to have been a success. Liza and Tama had gained a level each, and Pochi had gained two.

The girls seemed to acquire skills arbitrarily with their level, so Pochi now had the “Throwing” skill, Tama had the “Collecting” skill, and Liza got the “Disassembly” skill.

But there was something strange about Liza's skills. "Javelin" was in white text, but "Disassembly" was in gray. Pochi's and Tama's were in gray, too. If that meant the same thing as it did in my own interface, they hadn't been activated yet. If the girls could enable them, their combat abilities would vastly improve right away, but I could only see this information; I couldn't change around my party members' skills like in a single-player RPG.

There are still more than a hundred rooms left in this labyrinth… I'll figure things out as we go.

I motioned to the beastfolk girls, and we headed for the next room.

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We proceeded through six more chambers, but we still hadn't met any living humans. Only several more corpses.

"Master, we've finished retrieving the core."

"Great. Let's take a quick break."

I took a gulp from the Well Bag and handed it to Liza.

At some point, she had shifted from calling me "young master" to just "master." It seemed easier for her, so I didn't bother to stop her.

As she started to open the Well Bag, it slipped from her hands and fell to the ground, spilling out water into a puddle.

"I-I'm so, so sorry, master!!" Frantic, Liza scrambled to pick up the bag again. Her hands were shaking.

Come to think of it, Pochi's and Tama's throwing accuracy was pretty bad in that last fight.

"Are you tired?"

"I'm so sorry! I spilled your precious water… I'll accept whatever punishment you decide on."

She was making a big deal of this—it looked like she really did believe she'd failed horribly. *Did I not mention that it produces infinite water? You'd think they'd have noticed that by now, to be honest.*

More important, I should check on how they're doing.

"Don't worry, Liza. We can get more water. Are you not feeling well?"

"I'm terribly sorry. My body has felt heavy for a while now… I can't move as well as I'd like."

Tama and Pochi, too, had flopped down on the ground, apparently too unwell to even drink some water. I checked their statuses, but nothing was out of the ordinary. Their stamina seemed low, though, so they must just be tired.

"Maybe instead of a short break, we should take a rest for a while."

I gathered Pochi and Tama into my arms and took turns giving them water. I didn't have any more pastries, so I got some sliced jerky out of Storage instead, picking out whatever looked best from the preserved goods in my original loot. It was made from the meat of something called a "sky deer," which I had never heard of but was probably fine (judging by the "deer" part).

All three of them looked tired and defeated, but their hunger must have won out, because when I held the meat under their noses, they opened their mouths to chew as if by instinct.

"So, so yummy!"

"It's delicious, sir!"

"Ah, jerky… The more I chew it, the more the flavor fills my mouth. Truly divine."

Uh, I don't know if it's that *good.*

"Jerky? It's yummy!"

"Delicious, sir! Meat is the best, sir!"

Liza was still chewing away blissfully on her first piece. *Just how much do you guys love meat?*

I had dozens of pounds of jerky, so I handed out several pieces to each of them. "When you're done eating, go ahead and sleep for three hours or so."

Pochi and Tama happily curled up beside me and fell asleep at once, and Liza sat down to look after them. "I can keep watch," she said, but her face said

otherwise—she was practically asleep already. After I insisted a second time, she finally lay down to rest.

While the three dozed, I checked on their statuses.

About a half hour after we'd stopped, the gray skills changed to white.

Maybe the level-up had been applied now that they were resting? This was just like that dungeon-crawler *Older Scrolls*. Was I going to start aging because I wasn't in a stable?

At any rate, why did these three gain skills when they leveled up? Was it not normal, how I acquired skills as a result of my actions?

After the break, we proceeded through even more rooms. When we'd rested, the girls had been at the point of exhaustion after gaining about three levels, so it would probably be best to rest after another two areas.

"Stop!" Tama cried. It was unusual for her to shout so seriously.

But there aren't any enemies in front of us…

"What's wrong?"

"The floor is…weird?" she said uncertainly, almost like a question. So something was off, but she wasn't sure what? When I stopped and stared at the floor, its texture did look strange.

Before I could figure it out with my own eyes, an AR pop-up offered the answer. **Trap: Life Drainer**. *This* is *a dungeon, so I guess it makes sense it'd be rigged.* We hadn't encountered anything so far, so it hadn't crossed my mind.

"Well done, Tama! It looks like there's a trap there. Be careful."

"'kay!"

I petted Tama's head, scratching behind her cat ears. The latter part of my statement was directed toward Pochi and Liza. I had the three of them stand back and experimentally tossed a rock into the treacherous area, but nothing happened. Judging by the name, it would probably take a living being to activate it.

Unfortunately, the AR didn't show where the hazard began and ended, so I

didn’t know if edging along the side of the room would be safe. And I certainly wasn’t going to have one of the beastfolk test it out for me.

Checking the map, I didn’t see any detours around it, though. *If we need a live creature to activate it, maybe we can guide a monster there?*

Luckily enough, there were a few rat demons in the next room not far away. Maybe if I chucked a rock down the hall, the noise would attract them? I got a few stones from Tama and threw three of them in rapid succession.

“Rats are heeere!” Tama reported. I had the three girls back up even farther. The monsters were weak, only level 10, but three or four of them had come at the same time. It was possible some would get through, so we needed to keep our distance.

When they passed over the trap, the rats were ensnared in some kind of black flame. It looked like all three had been caught separately. So at least three life drainers had been set on this path.

> Skill Acquired: “Trap Disarming”

> Skill Acquired: “Trap Setting”

> Skill Acquired: “Trap Detection”

These trap-related skills seemed helpful, so I added skill points and activated them right away.

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Liza thrust her spear forward with all her might into the mouth of the giant frog.

Pochi jumped out and whacked its side with a stick to distract it, and Tama leaped in on the other side with her short sword, stabbing its enormous eye to finish it off.

“You did it! Great job!”

“Thank you!”

“Yay!”

“Yes, sir!”

This was their first time defeating a monster all on their own, so I was pleased. The opponent had been a simple level 10 frog demon whose special attack held its victim in place with its tongue, so I thought it might make a good trial for them, but it was hardly a challenge at all. *I guess beastfolk are stronger in a fight than humans of the same level.*

This room was about three times the size of the others we'd seen so far. You'd think there would be more enemies in a place this big, but no red dots appeared on the radar.

At the end of the room was a house. More specifically, half a house that had been cut neatly down the middle. It must have gotten pulled in when the labyrinth was made. Unfortunately, my radar showed no sign of any humans.

Liza took apart the giant frog while Pochi and Tama kept watch at the door. *So Liza's on disassembly duty this time?* Since she had the skill for it, I kept the three-girl-rotation lineup.

"Pochi, Tama, come with me. I'm going to investigate this house."

According to the map, there weren't any enemies nearby, so there should be no need to worry. Together with the two girls, I headed inside.

There was nobody living or dead in the building, but there were a lot of other items to be found. This seemed to have been a wealthy person's secret storehouse.

Once we entered, some lights automatically turned on. Some kind of magical device? They looked easily detachable, so I tried taking one from the wall, but it faded almost immediately. They must work only where they'd been installed.

The first thing that caught my eye was the pair of decorative short swords hanging on the wall. Checking the AR display, I was surprised to find that they actually had decent attack power. They were a convenient size, too, so I decided to give them to Tama and Pochi.

In a truly clichéd move, there was a safe behind one of the paintings, so I shot off the lock with the Magic Gun and looked inside. There was a pouch of gold coins, a few jewels, and a small bottle of a magic material labeled DRAGON SCALE POWDER.

Was the owner an alchemist?

Sure enough, I found some magic potions for recovery in another room, so I must have been right. I also found several books on magic and a magic scroll on a bookshelf. I didn't know how to use the scroll, but my guess was that one of the nearby books would explain it. I could read through them while the kids were napping and figure it out.

We collected some small things like jewelry, but larger objects like artwork we left in place. I could theoretically hold an infinite amount of items in Storage, but if I just grabbed everything in sight, it'd be a pain to sort through.

Among the artwork, there were two pedestals for mounting preserved animals. *Not that it matters, but are they out for repair or something? I would've liked to see some fantasy creatures up close.*

> Skill Acquired: "Excavation"

> Skill Acquired: "Treasure Hunting"

> Skill Acquired: "Treasure Box Unlocking"

I found a Tinder Rod in the kitchen. That was the only Magic Item around, but I also picked up a frying pan, a small pot, and four sets of tableware, which I put into the jute bag. There was a full water jug, too, so I poured some into an ordinary water pouch from Storage in case we ran into other people.

A lot of small bottles were in the kitchen as well, so I filled a few with oil and put them in Storage in case I needed an impromptu Molotov cocktail.

"I smell jerky over here! Sir!" Pochi announced in a voice that sounded ready to break into song. On the other side of some crumbling furniture was a food stock, and Pochi and Tama were practically scraping their faces trying to climb through.

It looked dangerous, so I had them stay back while I moved the obstruction aside one piece at a time to clear enough space for us to enter.

Inside, we found three big pieces of rye bread, plus cheese wheels and smoked meat. There was a cask of some fine-looking wine, too, so I snuck it into Storage while meat distracted the other two.

“Pochi, Tama, want to do some taste testing?”

“Yeah!”

“Yes, sir!”

I checked on the AR to make sure none of it was spoiled, then gave Pochi and Tama each a slice of cheese and meat.

“Yummy, yummy!”

“Awoo, it’s so tasty! I’m so happy, sir!”

Shaking their tails alone was apparently not enough to express their joy, so the girls were waggling their clenched fists as well.

I tasted a piece of the cheese for myself. It was good, with a rich flavor like strong cheddar.

“Let’s eat the rest with Liza, okay?”

“She’ll be so happy!”

“Good idea, sir! Let’s bring Liza some, sir!”

I gave the bag of weapons and small items to Pochi and the bag of food to Tama, while I carried the water jug and a washbasin as we returned to the chamber where Liza was waiting. When we came outside, she had finished retrieving the core and was just on her way toward the house.

“Master, I have a request…,” she murmured timidly. “Would it be all right if I started a fire?”

“A fire, underground? What for?” I asked.

“I thought it might be nice to grill the frog meat and eat it… Um. I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize. Is it edible, though?”

“Yes, it’s perfectly safe. I dissected and ate a giant frog just like this one a long time ago. There’s toxins in the intestines, but as long as you avoid those, it’s fine. But it has to be cooked, or there is a danger of poisoning…”

Liza trailed off after her halting explanation. Despite being underground, there seemed to be good airflow, and we’d come a ways up now, so lack of oxygen

probably wouldn't be a problem.

"Sure, go ahead."

Liza asked Pochi and Tama to butcher the frog legs, then pulled a wood block and some wood chips out of her bag, arranging them on the ground. *So that's why she's been collecting those as we go along.*

Liza started to use flint to spark the fire, but I stopped her and instead used the Tinder Rod I'd found. *I have no idea how this thing is made, but it's really easy to use.*

I handed off to Liza the cooking supplies and tableware I'd found inside.

Before long, Pochi and Tama came over with the frog-leg meat carried high above their heads.

"Meat!"

"It's meat, sir!"

They seemed even happier about this than the smoked meat from earlier. Maybe this was their animal instinct at work?

Liza sliced the flesh into pieces and lined them up in the frying pan to cook. First she cooked up the fatty parts in oil and set those aside on a plate. Then she started to cook the best parts. An aroma like grilled chicken wafted into the air. Based solely on the smell, I'd say it might actually taste pretty good. Looking impatient, Pochi and Tama closed their eyes and sniffed deeply.

When the frog was cooked through, Liza stabbed each piece onto a wooden skewer and held out the first helping to me.

I probably have to eat this, huh? Yeah, I guess I do.

"Thank you, Liza." Preparing myself for the worst, I took a bite—it tasted a bit like chicken, but for the most part the flavor was pretty sparse. All I had for seasoning was salt, so there wasn't much I could do about it. I didn't feel like going into the house to look for other spices, either. I checked in Storage briefly, but I didn't have pepper or anything.

The three of them watched intently as I ate. Oh, were they waiting for permission?

“Don’t just sit there watching me—eat up! If you don’t eat and rest properly, we won’t make it out of the labyrinth!”

As soon as I granted them permission, Pochi and Tama dug into the grilled meat straight from the frying pan. Liza, too, stopped cooking long enough to partake. Once in a while I heard a dreadful crunching noise, like one of them had gotten a piece with some bone in it, but all three looked like they were enjoying the meal immensely.

Watching them out of the corner of my eye, I snuck bites of rye bread, cheese, and smoked meat. Even if it tasted all right, frog wasn’t really my thing.

After that, the cycle of dissecting the frog, cooking the meat, and eating it continued for about a half an hour; the feast came to an end around the time when the fire ran out of fuel. At Liza’s suggestion, we wrapped some of the meat in cloth to bring it with us.

Based on our journey so far, the girls would be getting worn out after another two or three battles, so I decided they should rest now while they were full. This was the third break so far.

Before they slept, I had them clean up in the washbasin I’d brought from the house and change into new clothes I’d found there. They’d probably get dirty right away in the next battle, but it feels better to sleep in clean clothes, right?

Apparently, they were getting used to me, because Pochi and Tama fell asleep using my lap as a pillow; Liza didn’t lean on me, but she did curl up right by my side.

Oh, while they’re sleeping, I should take a look at the magic books I got. When I searched through the ones in my Storage, a new option, “Inspect,” was available for them, so I selected that. Just like in a game, it seemed like I could read a book without actually taking it out of Storage.

Come to think of it, I hadn’t given it a thought until now, but I was able to see the menu interface clearly even in dark places like this. Was it being projected directly onto my retinas, or maybe composited in my head?

Wait, I wonder— Sure enough, I discovered that I was able to search the contents of the open books, just like in a game. How convenient! No OCR

needed!

There were only a few lines about magic scrolls in one of the books, but it gave a sufficient explanation. It explained that you could use a magic scroll just by opening it and reading the name of the spell. The scroll I found contained a Fire Magic spell called Fire Shot, an offensive spell that was apparently the first one new Fire users learned.

Thanks to this discovery, I could now pass the time by reading while everyone was asleep.

◆

After another break, we'd made it almost 80 percent of the way to the exit of the labyrinth. Pochi and Tama were now using the ornamental short swords from that storehouse and small shields. That was the only change to the party's equipment, but all three of them had reached level 13. Pochi's skills were "One-Handed Sword," "Throwing," "Enemy Detection," and "Disassembly"; Tama's were "One-Handed Sword," "Throwing," "Collecting," and "Disassembly"; and Liza's were "Spear," "Spear Thrust," "Cooking," and "Disassembly."

There was a world of difference in their combat ability from when we started to now. In their current state, as long as an enemy didn't have any special attacks, the girls could beat one up to five levels higher than themselves by working together. Since none of them was a shield user who could serve as a tank, things got trickier if there were multiple higher-level monsters, but I was still impressed.

Farther down the passageway, we found a slime. It wasn't the cute water-droplet kind from Japan's favorite RPGs, though—more of a classic amoeba-like mucous creature.

This seemed as good a chance as any to try out my fire spell. I used the magic scroll for Fire Shot just as the book had directed. A fiery bullet only the size of my fingertip appeared, and it shot at the slime as slow as a ball tossed by a child.

Hitting its target, the little fireball toasted the surface of the slime only a little before disappearing. I checked the slime's HP gauge, and sure enough, it had gone down only the tiniest bit. So Fire Shot was no use, not even against a level 10 slime.

But I had gained the “Fire Magic” skill by using the spell, so I guess I could still call it a success.

When I checked my enabled magic, Fire Shot had appeared there, too. But really, from an MP-efficiency standpoint alone, the Magic Gun was way more useful, so there was no point in using my new ability. I guess it could be useful if I was ever without a fire-starting tool, though.

Perhaps misinterpreting my disappointment, Liza offered me some advice. “Master, forgive my insolence, but the best way to defeat a slime is to aim at its nucleus.”

“Oh? Where is that?”

“The area where the coloring is slightly different.”

So that wasn’t the same as a core? Come to think of it, even though the monster was semitransparent, I couldn’t see a red orb anywhere. *Do slimes not have cores?*

At any rate, when I looked where Liza was pointing, there was a small orb about half the size of a fist that was a darker color than the rest of the body.

“If you just destroy the nucleus…”

As we’d been chatting, the slime had slowly been oozing closer, but Liza took it out with a single thrust of her spear.

“…you can defeat a slime easily,” she concluded.

“We didn’t get a turn!”

“It just melted away, sir!”

It seemed like Pochi and Tama had been raring to fight the slime, because they looked a little disappointed. No, actually, Pochi seemed more upset that it had turned into a puddle of liquid. She prodded at it glumly with her short sword.

Still, we hadn’t seen any human corpses since two breaks ago, never mind survivors. The larger groups were still going strong, but all the small parties except for one were gone, probably eliminated by monsters.

“This wall is…weird?”

Tama had found a spot on the wall that looked out of place. It seemed to be a hidden door. When I consulted the map, it appeared there was indeed a passageway behind it.

But something was strange. I rotated the map to look at it from an overhead point of view. The path led from a room fifty feet above to a thousand-foot vertical drop, about ten feet across. *Is this some kind of pitfall trap?*

If this was a game, this might be a good place for an elevator shortcut to and from the deepest part of the dungeon. It would be dangerous to just carelessly go near it, so I had Tama make a mark on it with charcoal.

There was a crossroads ahead once we left the room, and in the front and center rooms, my map showed three survivors. They had been there about an hour ago when we took a break, too, so they must have been hiding in a safe place.

They were only five rooms away from the exit, but without a map, I guess they had no way of knowing that.

“Everyone, stop!”

The red dot of an enemy had appeared on my radar and was coming toward us at an alarming speed. There was only one, so I figured we could go back to the previous room and ambush it.

As we went back, I checked its information on the map. **Undead Beast**, an undead-type creature. Weakness: **holy type**. It had the skills **“Quick Maneuvers”** and **“Sprinting**.**”**

Continuing to read the information, I was a bit startled. “It’s…level forty?” That was stronger than any of the demons we’d seen so far. Was it here to sweep out the dungeon?!

This was just like an old game: an absurdly strong monster that appears if the player doesn’t clear the stage fast enough.

I hurried the three girls along, and we somehow made it into the room before the enemy arrived. I had the others take shelter in a corner. This guy would be way too much for them. If I let them fight it, they might get killed in a single blow.

The creature ambled in from the passageway. It looked like a huge panther—fifteen feet long and almost seven feet tall—with a red horn on its forehead.

Suddenly, it disappeared from sight.

Frantic, I checked the radar, but its position hadn't changed. There was a crash from above—was it leaping up to kick off from the ceiling and tackle me?!

I felt its paws hit my shoulders, and my back slammed into the ground so hard that I felt the floor crack. Good thing I had turned on my "Pain Resistance" skill when we first wound up in the labyrinth.

Still, were undead monsters supposed to be that fast?! If it kept darting about, I might not be able to cover the girls. I grabbed on to its legs with both hands, digging my fingers in deep to stop it.

…Maybe it was one of my skills, but my eye was suddenly drawn to the hidden door in the room.

The undead monster seemed not to feel pain, because it ignored my crushing grasp on its legs and started a biting attack. *I'd rather not experience these giant-ass fangs, if at all possible.*

I pushed it up and away from me, grabbed it by the middle, and threw it overhead into the wall. The undead monster landed its feet against the side of the room and started to push off for a counterattack—only to break right through and fall into the pit.

Good thing I had that "Trap Setting" skill.

◆

Now then, maybe we should meet up with those survivors.

When we went through the crossroads, a tacky white string was lying across the ground.

"Sticky, sticky!"

"It's clinging to my feet, sir."

"Maybe it's a spider's thread?"

The closer we got to the room, the thicker the spider thread became; I had

Pochi and Tama clear the way with their short swords.

In the room, we found seven cocoon-like objects. *Looks like the survivors are in three of these. We'd better get them out while the spider's not here.*

As we got closer, the people inside noticed and started wriggling frantically.

Just in case, I figured I'd check up on their information before we rescued them.

Nidoren. Forty-year-old slaver, level 11, with the skills "Negotiation," "Animal Taming," and "Calculation."

Viscount Jean Belton. Thirty-three-year-old noble, level 15, with the skills "Fire Magic," "Blaze Magic," and "Sociability." Apparently, he served as the sorcery advisor for the count's army.

The last person was a young man without a job. He was level 3, without any skills. *What's this guy, a NEET?*

The viscount looked like he could be useful in combat, but what had he been doing in the square in the first place?

At any rate, we divided up the work and set about freeing the men. I was in charge of the viscount, Liza was taking care of the merchant, and I assigned Pochi and Tama to the young man.

As we were about halfway through cutting the thick cocoons, I saw on my radar a spider approaching from below. There must have been a similar pit in here to the one I'd cast the undead beast into.

"There's an enemy on the way! Pochi, Tama, Liza, stop for a moment and get ready to intercept it!"

The beastfolk quickly readied their weapons and stood prepared to take on the spider. After the many battles they'd fought along the way, they seemed pretty used to cooperating.

It was a small mercy that we hadn't yet freed the faces of the trapped survivors. We didn't need them yammering away while we were trying to fight.

The spider crawled out from a hole in the floor. First, I tossed a stone at its head so it would focus on me. Next, Liza skewered its head with her spear to

stop it from moving, and Pochi and Tama stabbed its abdomen with their short swords.

It would've been nice if this first round of attacks was enough to kill it, but I guess it's no surprise that a demonic monster wouldn't die instantly from a stab to the face.

It reared up its front legs, but Liza stopped them in place with her spear held horizontally, and Pochi and Tama used that gap to go at it with their short swords, chipping away at its HP.

It seemed like this would take a while, so I stealthily flicked a small coin right through its heart, finishing off the creature. I timed my strike with one of Liza's attacks, so hopefully nobody would notice.

Leaving Tama to retrieve the core, the rest of us went back to our rescue mission. The viscount and I exchanged introductions as I finished rescuing him.

"Thank you for saving me. I am Viscount Jean Belton, the head of the prestigious Belton family, which has continued since the days of the ancestral king Yamato. If we make it out of here, you may expect to be handsomely rewarded."

"Thank you, Viscount. I'm Satou, a peddler."

I handed the viscount a water pouch and went to help save the others.

"Thank you so much for your help. I am Nidoren the merchant. This may upset the young ladies here, but I trade in slaves."

"I'm a novice peddler, Satou."

"A peddler, eh? I would have sworn you to be an adventurer."

"An adventurer?" I asked, handing Nidoren some water. "I've never heard of an occupation like that before. What sort of people are they?"

"Ah…perhaps in the Shiga Kingdom they'd be called 'explorers.' They fight monsters in dungeons, collecting monster cores and treasures. It's a profitable trade, but only if you don't mind being at death's door at any given moment."

I see… So there are gamelike occupations in this world, too, huh?

“Tch! Don’t touch me, beastchild! Give me the short sword, and I’ll do it myself!”

“I—I can’t do that, sir. This sword belongs to my master, sir.”

“What’s that?! You’ve got a lot of nerve for a beastfolk brat!”

Pochi seemed to be having trouble with the young man she was trying to save, so I went over to help her.

This guy seems like an ass, though. That blond hair looks kind of familiar… Oh, it’s the same guy who kicked the firewood out of Pochi’s arms back in the east quarter!

“Pochi, come back over here.”

“Yes, sir.”

She rushed over, her eyes starting to fill with tears from being yelled at; I caught her in my arms and patted her head reassuringly. The way she was rubbing her face into my stomach tickled a bit, but I wasn’t going to stop her in her current state.

“Oi, you, hurry up and help me!”

“Sorry, but I’m not really feeling it anymore. You can just stay and get eaten by a monster or whatever. One of your hands is free now, so you should be able to get out on your own, right?”

Of course, I wasn’t serious. It was just a little threat.

But since he made Pochi cry, I figured the least I could do was let him fear for his life a little.

“Hey, that’s not funny! Get me out of here now!”

“Silence, peasant,” the viscount thundered at the young man recklessly flapping his jaw. “If you make another sound and risk attracting more monsters, I’ll burn you to cinders, down to your very bones, with my flames.”

That’s a lot of intensity for a fairly young guy. People who are used to being waited on hand and foot sure are different.

In the end, we left to Nidoren the job of rescuing the third man. He skillfully

used a slim dagger to cut through the thread. As he worked, he whispered something in the young man's ear, and the rescue immediately stopped his grumbling.

An old man's words to the wise, maybe?

Watching with admiration, I paused to accept the core from Tama.

"The cores here are of a very high grade. It's not often you see one so red on the market."

According to Nidoren, these could be purified for use in the creation of Magic Items; the higher the grade, the more effective the result, making it possible to create high-quality magical tools.

I had the beastfolk girls recover the articles of the deceased in the rest of the cocoons while I offered the survivors some food. (Not the frog meat, of course.) The viscount made some complaints about the humble quality, but his hunger won out in the end, and he gobbled up his fill.

Some light armor was in a few of the cocoons, so I handed it off to Nidoren and the viscount. The young man had gotten meeker since being admonished by the older merchant, so I gave him some equipment for self-defense, just in case. *I'll just think of it as increasing our party's combat ability.*

In the end, that plan may have been a bit naive.

"I have no desire to use my magic on such minor foes as these. My abilities are suited for only the most formidable opponents."

"I'll take care of myself somehow, but don't count on me to help out in combat, please."

The viscount wouldn't use his magic because of some excuse or another, and Nidoren blithely declared himself unfit for combat, so both conveniently avoided helping in battle.

Nidoren's one thing, but I had high hopes for the viscount's magic.

But more frustrating than either of those two was the young man. Apparently, being given the bronze short sword and shield had gone to his head…

"Hmph! If those beastfolk brats can fight, then I can take on a hundredfold

more than them combined! If I'd had a weapon back there, that stupid spider wouldn't have slowed me down a bit!" he declared, rushing to attack a monster—only to be nearly defeated in a single hit.

His opponent was a single level 10 skeleton, so before it could finish him off, Pochi rushed in and saved him, catching the blow from its club with her small shield.

"Liza, if you would."

"Of course."

At my simple order, Liza hefted her spear. She broke through the skeleton's form with her first strike, knocked off the arm holding its weapon with the second, and destroyed its skull with her third.

Despite the fact that it lacked eyeballs in the first place, it seemed the skeleton could no longer see after losing its skull, and it launched an attack completely at random. Pochi and Tama sprang into action, and the two girls dispatched their opponent with ease.

Still, having seen a skeleton-type monster in person for the first time, I had to wonder: *How on earth do they move? Is the core the source of their power, maybe?*

Once again, I had to ask Nidoren to take care of the young man, who was lying on the ground moaning.

"Are you all right there?"

"Tch… I didn't expect a skeleton to be so strong."

"It looks like you might have a broken rib here…"

Ignoring the young man's curses, I listened to the slave merchant's diagnosis. *If his rib is broken, we shouldn't move him… What are we supposed to do?*

"Nngh…! Am I gonna die here?"

"If Pochi hadn't saved you, I'm pretty sure you'd have died the instant that club hit your skull."

This would've been the perfect chance for him to apologize to Pochi after

she'd saved his life, but he didn't utter a word of thanks. *Well, I'm not interested in hearing his complaints, then.*

"Damn it, damn it, damn it! I gotta live! I'm not gonna die in a place like this!" the young man spat bitterly, as blood trickled from his lips.

"Hmph. If he can't walk on his own, we should leave him behind. Meeting up with the troops who have been sent to help us is more important right now. Know that your own foolhardiness has been the death of you, peasant. You should accept the consequences of your actions."

Whoa, that's cold. Unlike me, he sounds completely serious.

Pochi and Tama were looking up at me with eyes that begged me to do something for the man, so I had no choice but to break out one of my last resorts.

"Use this medicine, then."

"What is it?"

"It's a magic potion."

"Magic potion?!"

He seemed pretty shocked by that phrase, but it was just something I'd found in the alchemist's house, so I had no idea how effective it would actually be.

Be grateful that Pochi and Tama are so kind, pal. If they hadn't pressed me to do something, I doubt I would've given you this.

Nervously, the young man brought the potion to his lips. The effect was startlingly immediate.

Just moments ago, he'd been groaning in pain, but less than a second afterward, he shouted, "I'm healed!" and leaped to his feet. It was just as quick as it would have been in a game. I found it a tiny bit disturbing, to be honest.

"A single intermediate-level potion is worth three gold coins, you know. You must be a very odd fellow to let a stranger drink a thing like that."

When the slave merchant quoted a number that was a bit higher than my estimated market price, the color drained right back out of the young man's

face.

I wasn't particularly planning to demand a fee from him, but I didn't go out of my way to tell him not to worry, either.

◆

Thanks to my "Keen Hearing" skill, the sound of a commotion ahead of us reached my ears before anyone else's.

Zena and her group of soldiers were battling slimes. But had they really charged into a room chock-full of monsters without trying to clear it out first? That seemed way too careless.

"Fightiiing!"

"I hear battle sounds coming from over there, sir!"

Pochi and Tama must have heard it, too, because they pointed in that direction as they made their report.

I nodded and told the other survivors that we would go on ahead.

"It seems someone's engaged in combat a little farther up. We'll go in first, so please follow behind and watch our backs."

The viscount looked like he was about to say something, but I ran off without stopping to listen.

Zena didn't seem to be injured, but she was low on MP, so I was worried about her.

A few men clad in tunics tumbled out of the room Zena and the other soldiers were in.

"Wah! Stay away from me!"

"It burns…so hot… I don't wanna die!"

The last man seemed to be pressed into the ground, apparently being sucked in by a slime. He desperately stretched out his hand, begging for help, but his compatriots were too terrified to do anything but shrink away.

"Pochi, Tama, grab some torches from the bag."

“’kay!”

“Yes, sir!”

I lit the ends of their torches with the Tinder Rod, taking one for myself as well.

“Use these to drive back the slimes and pull them off that man. Liza, take them out by aiming at their nuclei. Once you beat them, leave the cleanup for later and follow me.”

The three of them confirmed their orders, and we rushed into the room. I was a little worried about leaving the younger girls on their own, but since Liza was with them and knew how to defeat these monsters, it should be an easy victory for them. They had the torches, too.

Focusing on Zena’s marker on my radar, I pushed past the people and slimes locked in a free-for-all.

There she is! Zena was fighting off slimes with a long staff, protecting a group of priestesses who were in turn protecting the Oracle. The fact that she was using her staff must mean she’d finally run out of magic.

I thought I might try to snipe the nuclei with coins from a distance, but I didn’t have a good angle. If I messed up, I’d hit the Oracle instead.

One of the monsters attempted to suck in Zena’s staff, pulling her down.

She let out a cry of anguish.

I’m coming!

I unfastened my cloak as I ran, tossed it over the slime that was covering the magic soldier, and used it to pull her attacker off.

With the sound of cloth ripping and a short cry from Zena, I managed to toss the slime behind me. Holding it off with fire, I pulled out a rarely used knife and threw it at the creature’s nucleus, destroying it.

“Are you all right?”

I turned to Zena to make sure she was safe—but my voice cut off in a squeak of surprise.

The indecent slime had torn a huge hole in her blouse. On top of that, it had

even melted through part of her chest wrapping, making it come undone.

In short, well…there was nothing left to hide her modest femininity.

Having narrowly escaped a brush with death, Zena herself didn't seem to have noticed this yet.

It would be wrong to stare, so I reached into Storage via my bag and pulled out a clean piece of cloth, tossing it over to cover her front.

"Oh—thank you! …Satou?!"

Covering her chest with the fabric, Zena finally noticed my presence; with a cry of surprise, she leaped up to embrace me.

Uh, you're gonna drop the all-important cloth I just gave you!

"Satou! I'm so glad you're all right!"

I wasn't sure if our relationship was really close enough to warrant all that, but I wasn't going to complain about a cute girl hugging me. Besides, I was happy to be reunited, too.

And it was all well and good for me to enjoy her soft embrace until she came to her senses, but I did think the agonizing screams of battle all around us dampened the mood a little bit.

The Oracle priestess whom Zena had been protecting approached from behind her. Huh? Come to think of it, what was the Parion Oracle doing in a place like this? I knew they'd been on their way to a house call in the west quarter, so maybe they'd gotten caught up in the labyrinth business on their way back?

"Zena, please save your excitement about your reunion for later. For now, finishing off these monsters takes priority."

"Ah, s-sorry about that! Gosh, what am I doing?"

"Don't worry. I'm happy that you were so pleased to see me."

The Oracle pointed at the piece of cloth that was now at a priestess's feet, and the priestess collected it and handed it to Zena. Flustered, she hurriedly tied it around the front of her blouse; I watched her fondly for a second before turning to the Oracle.

“From your performance a moment ago, it would seem that you know the weak point of these creatures, do you not?”

“Yes, that’s right. Slimes all have nuclei, so if you strike that, you can defeat them easily.”

“Leave it to you, Satou! You’re not just nimble—you’re also very knowledgeable, too!”

“Not at all. I just learned that from Liza.”

“Liza? I-is that a woman?”

On hearing the unfamiliar name, Zena pressed closer to me. *Right. I guess I named her while we were in the dungeon, so Zena wouldn’t know her name.*

“Save your infidelity interrogation for later, please. Is there a way to tell by sight where the slime’s nucleus is?”

Excuse you, Oracle. “Infidelity”? Thanks for making me look bad with a groundless accusation. Well, I can clear up this misunderstanding later.

“There is. The nucleus is a slightly different color, and if you approach it with fire, the slime will recoil and try to keep it away from you—so if you know what to look for, it’s easy to find.”

“Zena, can you use Whisper Wind?”

“I’m sorry; I used up all my magic, so I won’t be able to for a while…”

If only I could transfer some of my unnecessarily plentiful MP to her. Still, I had to wonder if the rate or method of recovery varied from person to person; these young ladies’ magic showed no signs of replenishing.

Whoops, better save my analysis for later. I wonder if I’d gain some sort of useful communication skill by shouting?

I sucked in air deeply, filling my lungs, and shouted as loudly as I could. “Aim for the slimes’ nuclei!”

> Skill Acquired: “Amplification”

Due to the nature of my line of work, I wasn’t really used to shouting, and my voice cracked…but I managed to get the skill anyway. I put some points into it, then repeated my cry, adding on a supplementary explanation.

It was a short clarification but seemed to have effectively reached the soldiers, because they started to eliminate the slimes with pinpoint accuracy. This was probably thanks to their expertise as soldiers, but it might also have something to do with my “Direction” skill.

A nearby slime started creeping up on us from its hiding place, but Liza and the girls caught up just in time to take it out.

The soldiers seemed to be fine, but there were a few groups of civilians who were being driven back to the wall, so I brought the girls with me to come to their aid. Before we parted, I handed the priestesses a lit torch. There weren’t any monsters around them, but just to be safe.

In a foolproof winning strategy, Pochi and Tama were driving back the slimes with torchlight while Liza stabbed the nuclei, steadily whittling down the enemy numbers.

My role was just to call out to the people who were alarmed by the sudden appearance of the beastfolk and get them to calm down.

Man, I wish things were always this easy.

When most of the slimes had been taken care of, I headed back toward Zena and the others.

At some point, Nidoren, Viscount Belton, and the other man had arrived in the room as well. They, too, found some friends and rejoiced at their reunion.

“Sir Satou, we truly appreciate your help.”

“It’s all right. I’m just glad I made it in time.”

When I got back to Zena’s group, the priestesses thanked me as well.

Zena and the Oracle were sitting on the ground with their eyes closed. *Are they meditating or something?* My guess was that this was an easy stance from which to regain MP. They seemed to be recovering it much faster than before.

Keeping an eye on the two as they meditated peacefully, I looked around at the rest of the room.

Of the fifty or so soldiers who’d been trapped in the labyrinth, about 70 percent were here. It seemed that seven of them had been killed, and five were with another group in the demon’s maze.

Aside from the soldiers, about twenty civilians were here, too, including the ones we’d seen fleeing the room before.

One of the other priestesses was gathering the wounded near the Oracle. It seemed like she was going to use some kind of AOE healing spell, so we moved back to give her space.

With most of her magic recovered, the priestess chanted a really long incantation.

The chant took a good two or three minutes; looking bored, Pochi and Tama

yawned and stretched. *Or maybe they're just tired?*

"… ■■■ ***Area Heal*** *Han'i Kaifuku!"*

When the spell was complete, a cone of soft light shone down on the priestess and spread out to encompass the people around her. *Where's that coming from?* Curious, I reached out to touch the light.

> Skill Acquired: "Holy Magic: Parion Faith"

Whoa, I gained the skill just by touching it. Once again, this seems a little too easy…

It looked like this magic had healed most of the injured.

The Oracle priestess seemed to have used up most of her MP with this spell, so her companion priestesses went about casting additional healing spells on those who needed them.

Having finished her meditation, Zena ran her fingers through her hair as she spoke to me.

"I really am glad you're all right, though."

"Well, these girls were a big help there." I reintroduced the beastfolk to the relieved Zena.

"Ah, the demi-human children from back in the plaza."

"My name…is Pochi."

"Tamaaa."

"I am called Liza."

Shyly, Pochi and Tama introduced themselves as briefly as possible and hid behind my legs. Only Liza seemed to remember that Zena had defended them before.

"We're immensely grateful that you protected us from those stones on the surface. Without your sorcery, I doubt these children and I would have survived for long. Thank you very much." Liza bowed deeply as she thanked Zena.

Apparently remembering Liza's words, Pochi and Tama emerged from behind me and bowed.

“Thanks!”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

Zena giggled. “You’re welcome.”

Amusingly, the girls immediately used me as a shield again once they’d thanked her.

“Oh, that’s right, Satou! The exit might not be far from this room!”

“Really? Did you find that out with magic?”

“Yes, I have a spell called Path Finder that can get information from the flow of the air!” Zena told me in a whisper. “But you see, since it’s based on the air, it’s hard to say whether it came from a path that’s accessible to people. There’s a scout investigating right now, so we’ll have to wait a little longer.”

“Sure. Then let’s hope for good news.”

Apparently, right after that scout had left, the slimes had dropped from the ceiling, and that’s how the whole situation had started.

While we waited, I observed the room around us. The civilians had gathered in a corner to rest.

The viscount seemed to be discussing something with what looked like the army unit’s captain. *Maybe next time you can actually do something useful with your “Blaze Magic.”*

It seemed that past this room was a long passageway that led to the exit, but there was a small problem.

Like the setup of some messed-up dungeon master, there was a Skeleton Room partway through in an unavoidable location.

The soldiers and the viscount’s magic could probably dispatch the thirty-odd skeletons between levels 10 and 15, but there were three more formidable enemies: a level 30 skeleton knight, skeleton warrior, and skeleton death scythe.

The death scythe, in particular, seemed to have an insta-kill attack that we couldn’t afford to ignore. If we had a Turn Undead–type move that purified evil creatures, like in a game, then we could beat this easily.

Strategically, then, the best move was probably to wait for the Oracle and the priestesses to recover their magic.

The scout who'd been sent ahead to investigate the path soon returned and reported to the captain the same information I'd just investigated. The captain gathered his best staff, the priestesses, and the viscount to come up with a strategy.

Pochi and Tama seemed tired of all the waiting and were starting to doze off, so I let them take a quick nap in my lap. Liza, too, rested up for a while by my side.

Then, after the captain's explanation, the battle began. We were left out of the proceedings.

The group's strategy was to shave down the skeletons' HP with the viscount's magic, use Zena's magic to break apart the enemies, then lure them one by one back to the room we were in to finish them off.

It seemed that they were using the narrow hallway to create a one-versus-many situation in their favor. Three of the priestesses supported the soldiers from behind, using a Turn Undead spell.

The civilians had been moved to a smaller room, with those capable of battle—like hunters and merchants' guards—patrolling the hallway to protect the room from monsters.

We'd been evacuated here, too, but now we were getting ready to leave.

This was thanks to a group of men who seemed to be friends with the one we'd rescued before, who were upsetting the beastfolk with their jeers and complaints.

Nidoren the slave trader and his friends rebuked the group for us, but if I had to be stuck in a hostile environment, I might as well be near the battlefield.

Maybe because they'd saved his life, the young man himself wasn't saying anything bad about the girls. He was halfheartedly trying to change the subject, but it wasn't doing much good.

I thanked Nidoren and his friends, and we left to stand near the entrance to

the battlefield.

From here, I had a good view of the scene inside the large room.

The path to the Skeleton Room up ahead must have been a straight one, because I could see the faint red glow of fire sweeping the area.

“Here they come! Spears at the ready!”

At the squad leader’s orders, the group of soldiers got into formation, lowering their spears.

Next, Zena and the viscount, who’d been sent ahead to get a head start with their magic, came leaping back into the room, followed shortly by a knight in lightweight armor. Directly behind him was a huge group of skeleton soldiers.

Two heavily armored knights formed a barrier in front of the passageway, halting the skeletons’ advance.

“Spearmen! Don’t stab—swing at them!”

At the squad leader’s orders, a countless number of spears descended on the skeletons, steadily depleting their HP.

Then the priestesses shot their purifying spells into the mix, finishing them off. Their resistance to the magic must have been reduced when they were low on health.

“Two of the big ones are coming! Captain Kigouri, we’re counting on you!”

“Aye! Bouza, can you take one of ’em?”

“Leave it to me, Captain! I’m on fire!”

The broadsword-wielding captain, who was the highest level of the lot, and a heavy soldier with a huge battle-ax and the second-highest level, were apparently in charge of the skeleton knight and the skeleton warrior.

The two large monsters broke through the front lines, and the two men took control, locking in battle with them a little ways away. They exchanged furious blows: the captain’s broadsword against the skeleton knight’s shield, and the hotheaded soldier’s battle-ax against the skeleton warrior’s club.

“… ■■■ ***Bind Air*** *Fuubaku!”*

To support the heavy soldier, who seemed to be at a slight disadvantage, Zena cast a spell to limit his foe's movements.

The viscount was standing with his arms crossed and looking decidedly self-important, but it didn't seem like he was going to do anything.

*"… ■ ■**Turn Undead** Jouka!"*

The Oracle's purifying magic shot into action. The weaker skeletons collapsed into a pile of bones, but the larger ones resisted it. Still, it seemed to have made them flinch, so the tide of battle was starting to turn.

"Tch! Be careful of the black one! Its scythe can cut through shields!"

There was a torrent of noise and a spray of blood from the front lines.

The skeleton death scythe was the same height as the small-fry, but its bones were pure black. Its scythe was just like the kind that Death itself carries in images—not built for combat, but it could break through shields and cut through armor like paper.

The knights who made up the front lines were more than ten levels lower than the death scythe. If things went on like this, it seemed like the vanguard would crumble.

I took a small penny out of my pocket, fiddling with it in my hand.

I waited for the moment the death scythe swung its weapon and the spearmen moved away, then pitched the coin at the monster. My target was the skeleton's ankle joint. Between my "Throwing" skill and my "Sniping" skill, I landed a direct hit on the tiny target from a full sixty feet away.

Since I'd timed it along with the skeleton's attack, the momentum of its swing brought the monster crashing to the ground. To the soldiers fighting it, it should just look like it had swung too hard and fallen.

Not letting the chance go to waste, the soldiers and knights brought down a barrage of maces and the butt ends of spears, destroying the arm that held the blade.

Without letting a second go to waste, the Oracle came in with her purifying magic, reducing the black death scythe to a pile of white bone fragments.

From there, although it was a close game, the army was able to dispatch the rest of the skeletons without a single loss of human life.

Along with the people who'd been taking shelter, we proceeded to the Skeleton Room.

This room was even bigger than the one we'd been in before. It was about as big as two gymnasiums put together. The whole area was made up of bare rock, the natural ups and downs of which made it difficult to walk on the floor.

It was too dark to see the ceiling, but it seemed to be about fifty feet up.

On the way back to the surface, a heavy metal door blocked the passage. It was locked, and nobody seemed to be able to open it.

The knights tried to destroy it with their clubs and maces, but all this accomplished was a lot of loud, fruitless noise. Pochi and Tama covered their ears, cowering unhappily.

The clamor carried on for a while, but finally they seemed to give up and accept that they'd have to rely on magic.

"Viscount Belton, Zena, can either of you destroy it?"

"My Blaze Magic could easily make short work of it, but I would prefer to leave this to the hands of the youth."

"M-my magic?"

Zena's Air Hammer only kicked up the dirt around the door, not budging the heavy metal an inch. *Air doesn't weigh anything, so it's probably not too effective against solid objects.*

I'll have to comfort her later.

Next, the viscount tried his Flame Tongue spell, but all it did was scorch the surface.

Oblivious to the growing gloom of the party, Tama tugged on my sleeve with her latest report. "Master, that wall is…weird!"

Looking in the direction she pointed in, there was indeed a section of the wall that seemed out of place.

Checking my map, I saw that it was a hidden door. This seemed to be the top of the shaft where I'd thrown the undead beast near the spider's lair.

"Good eye, Tama."

I petted her head and scratched her cat ears. Of course, Pochi looked left out, so I patted her with my other hand. And tousled her dog ears, of course.

While I was preoccupied with this task, a new enemy signal appeared on my radar. But what I heard from the soldiers and merchants investigating near it were cheers of joy, not screams.

What's going on? Puzzled, I looked in that direction while checking the monster's real form on my map at the same time.

"Hey, there's a treasure chest here!"

"Ooh! I've heard of them appearing in dungeons sometimes!"

"It's mine! I found it first!"

Just then, the man's obnoxious claim turned into a scream.

"Oh-ho-ho-ho…to think that so many of you made it here! I, impressed!"

Before us was the eyeball demon who had pulled us into the labyrinth. *I thought he wasn't here, but he's just been disguising himself?!*

"Everyone, get into position! We're going to form a three-pronged attack, not a circle! This thing can use magic—Viscount, Zena, we'll need you on defense!"

The captain sprang into action, ordering the troops into formation. Zena cast Wind Protection and Air Cushion in rapid succession. The Oracle and her priestesses must have used up their magic, because they quickly took shelter in a corner.

"I knew you'd show up, demon! Unfortunately for you, there's no defense against my Blaze Magic. I'm going to use Blast Pole. Buy me some time!"

Oh-ho, I thought this guy was just stingy with his magic, but I guess he was saving it for a demon encounter. I apologized to the viscount in my mind, reconsidering my opinion of him a little.

The demon howled, and black spheres appeared all around him. They circled

him, repelling any knights who tried to get near him.

“Human magic is too slow. I, bored!”

His giant eye blinked for a moment.

Hmm? What was that? Something felt strange for a moment there.

> Skill Acquired: “Evil-Eye Resistance”

I glanced at my log and noticed I’d gotten a new skill. Looking around, I saw that the people who had been directly in front of the eye now had the status **Charmed**.

Even the beastfolk girls had apparently been unable to resist.

“Master! This is incredible, sir! So much meat, sir!”

“I’m gonna eat the meat!”

“Pochi, Tama! We have to hunt as much as we can for the master’s sake!”

They must have been hallucinating that the soldiers around them were roast chicken and beef or something.

I felt bad when they looked so happy, but I had to quickly knock them out with the side of my hand and carry them to a corner of the room. This spot was in the shadow of a large rock, so they should be safe even if the demon cast a big area-effect spell.

The Charmed soldiers were attacking their comrades, but they were outnumbered enough for it not to turn into a massive bloodbath.

At present, the captain and the battle-crazed heavy soldier from before were locked in direct combat with the eyeball monster. The black spheres caught the strikes from their broadsword and battle-ax, though, so they weren’t able to reach the monster himself.

Zena was a little ways away using support magic, but she didn’t seem to have much MP left.

“Stupid humans, kill each other! I, happy!” The demon sneered, apparently enjoying the mayhem. His words ended with another howl, and his body glowed a dark red.

At last, Viscount Belton finished his chant, and a pillar of flame erupted from below the demon's feet.

"Foul demon! We humans won't allow your kind to trample on us forever!"

But as if to mock the viscount's cheesy line as he brandished his staff, the eyeball fluttered about coolly in the middle of the fire. An AR pop-up read, **Fire damage cut by 75 percent**; he must have used a defense spell right before the attack.

Like the demon himself had said, the chant was so lengthy that it was probably easy to defend against it in time. *How sneaky.*

"Hot! HOT! It's nice and hot! I, cozy!"

"What the?! Intermediate magic doesn't work on him?!"

"Doesn't work? Of course it worked. I, kind."

Sure enough, the demon's health bar had decreased, but by only a small fraction.

"Ah, your despair feels so good! I, thrilled!"

At this rate, it was only a matter of time before someone got killed.

Zena said low-grade demons are as strong as a wyvern, but this guy is definitely tougher than that.

I'm going to have to fight, even if it means I'll stand out.

Showing off my superhuman powers might end in all of Seiryuu City chasing after me, but I can't just stand by and let Zena die.

Just as I had made that decision, however, screams came from the other room, as if to dampen my resolve.

Turning toward the passageway, I saw Nidoren and the others running toward us with a bloodied undead beast at their heels.

Crap! I had been so occupied with what was in front of me that I'd forgotten to keep an eye on my radar. Kicking myself, I picked up a rock from the ground in front of me and threw it at the monster's face.

The only reason I didn't finish it off in one blow was so that I could use it.

The undead beast turned its empty eye sockets toward me and ignored the middle-aged man it had been about to crush in favor of coming toward me.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Zena's shocked expression. "Satou?!"

I caught the undead beast's charge with both hands, and its momentum sent both of us flying into the wall with the hidden passage behind it. The fragile wall crumbled, and the beast and I were both swallowed up in the darkness.

"Zena! Stay in position!"

"No, let me go! Satou, Satooou!"

The sound of Zena shrieking my name faded as I dropped into the abyss.

Sorry, Zena. You can scold me for this later.

I had fallen into the pit behind the secret door. It would have been a huge pain to get back to the battlefield from a thousand feet down, so I had grabbed a ledge about fifteen feet down and pulled myself into a small room.

Normally, this kind of acrobatic movement would have resulted in nothing but some broken fingers, but my leveled-up body could do some ridiculous things.

The undead monster had ended up in the room with me, so I finally had a chance to bring out one of my Holy Swords again.

It didn't glow blue, but it was still insanely sharp, enough to cut the monster in half without the slightest resistance. The sword caused me a minute amount of damage as long as I had it out, so I put it back in its scabbard.

All right. I can disguise myself while I'm in this room.

I changed out of my robe into some shabbier clothes, with a richly colored overcoat on top. The hood could probably cover my face, but it still made me a little nervous.

Looking through my Storage, I found something pretty convenient: the dragon mask I'd bought with Martha. She'd said this silver mask was quite popular last year, which meant they wouldn't be able to track it down to one owner. I put on the blond wig I'd bought then, too.

Great. I'm all set.

I ran like the wind down the passageway, heading back to the battlefield.

In the room before the Skeleton Room, there was a bunch of weak monsters—maybe summoned by the demon—pressing down on the hunters and guards who desperately fought to protect the entrance to the smaller room where the others were hidden.

I made sure there was no one in the passageway, then took a boulder out of Storage and rolled it along. The overwhelming mass crushed the monsters.

> Title Acquired: Merciless One

I made sure the attack had taken out all the enemies, then bounded past the stunned hunters and guards and headed toward the Skeleton Room.

The battle against the demon continued unabated.

In the few minutes I'd been gone, several soldiers had taken serious injuries, but Zena appeared to be unharmed. The beastfolk girls were still passed out in the corner, but they were fine as well.

Thanks to what was probably the viscount's magic, a circle of flames around the eyeball made close combat impossible. I tossed another rock from Storage at the center of the demon's huge eye.

"Guh? What was that? I, surprised!"

"Quit screwing around! We don't need help from a masked weirdo like you!"

Oh dear, I've been rejected?

Wearing the silver festival mask to hide my identity had apparently backfired.

The demon howled, and a transparent black screen appeared in front of him.

I lightly tossed a rock at it, but right in front of the screen, it suddenly lost all momentum and dropped harmlessly to the floor. It must have been a magic defense against projectiles.

"Who are you? Thinking you could harm a demon with a mere rock? I, so perplexed!"

His next cry created a black javelin. *Is howling like that the demon equivalent of a chant?*

The missile flew toward me, but I dodged it easily. It was moving at a pretty high speed, but maybe my “Evasion” skill helped me with the timing.

While I had the demon distracted, the viscount’s Flame Spear and the priestess’s Sacred Javelin spells hit the demon squarely in the temple, reducing his HP by a large margin. At the same time, the captain’s broadsword and the heavy soldier’s battle-ax crashed into him from the other side.

The ax didn’t do any damage, but the sword must have been a magic weapon of some kind, because it took out another chunk of the demon’s HP.

“Aargh, am I going to be defeated by humans? HUMANS? I, embarrassed!”

A magic circle appeared at the demon’s feet.

“He’s going to cast something! Everyone, defensive positions!”

At the captain’s warning, the soldiers took cover behind nearby rocks.

In a game, this would be the time to attack the demon head-on with all my might to try to finish it, but in reality, I guess damage control was more important. Charging the demon here would probably be akin to trying to put out a dynamite fuse before it exploded.

Still, I felt like I should take this chance to finish him off, so I pulled out the Holy Sword at my waist and charged. Unfortunately, something fell from the ceiling and landed on me, preventing my advance.

> Skill Acquired: “Dark Magic: Demon”

> Skill Acquired: “Dark Resistance”

Damn, is it one of those black spheres that stopped the soldiers’ attacks before?

Getting new skills was great and all, but that magic circle was highly concerning. I had dropped my sword when I hit the ground, so I had to shove the sphere off with my bare hands.

The magic square rose up toward the ceiling, with the hell demon in the center.

“Ah, master! I, yearning.”

A jet-black giant emerged from the magic circle.

◆

I could only describe this thing as a real demon.

He had the horns of a ram, glowing dark-red eyes, and gleaming black skin. There were shining metal claws at the ends of each of his four arms. Black bat wings sprouted from his back with veins of red, plus a forked tail with sharp points on the end. The twenty-foot-tall giant was floating in midair.

This was a level 62 greater hell demon, with skills in three kinds of magic—Wind, Lightning, and Dark—as well as hand-to-hand combat. On top of that, he had five extra skills inherent to his species—“Flight,” “Petrifying Breath,” “Poison,” “Regeneration,” and “Spawn Creation.”

“How can this be?! It summoned an intermediate hell demon?”

“Wrong, Human. The Great I, Displeased.”

“My master is the demon lord’s right-hand man! A god among demons! I, correcting!”

“I don’t believe it. A greater hell demon?!”

Stunned by the new enemy, the viscount and captain fell to their knees in despair—realizing it was a superior hell demon. The only ones who seemed able to bear the news were the battle-crazy warrior and the Oracle.

“You Did Good Work Creating The Labyrinth And Summoning Me. The Great I, Gratified.”

The giant beast grabbed the eyeball demon.

“Ah, I can be a part of master again! I, delighted!”

With that, the greater demon bit into his subordinate and devoured him.

When this gruesome ritual was completed, another head sprouted from the monster’s, his face nothing but an eyeball.

They fused somehow? Well, at least he didn’t evolve or level up or anything.

“Soldiers, Stand Up And Fight. The Great I, Choosing You.”

A howl overlapped the creature's voice, apparently from the new head.

Winds that would put a hurricane to shame whipped up in the room, throwing the soldiers against the wall. I raced against the gale, catching Zena and the Oracle priestess before they hit the wall, too.

The men are going to have to bear it themselves. I can't catch everyone.

> Skill Acquired: "Wind Magic: Demon"

> Skill Acquired: "Wind Resistance"

I gained two new skills as I fought the magic, so I put some points into "Wind Resistance."

Grabbing my Holy Sword from the rock it was lodged in, I stood facing the demon. He looked down at me scornfully, but his frown deepened into a scowl of hatred when he saw my sword.

"So There's A Hero Among Us, Is There? Did You Get A Divine Revelation? The Great I, Enraged."

Even as he spoke, the creature was casting magic in the background. *This thing is seriously sneaky.*

A jet-black aura appeared around his body. Probably some kind of support magic.

But I can be sneaky, too. I checked the effect of the demon's magic on my AR screen. Sure enough, it was a fortifying spell. **Physical damage cut by 90 percent**, the ridiculous effect read.

"Your Carelessness Will Be Your Downfall! The Great I, Full Power."

The greater hell demon howled again; his claws, horns, and tail glowed black. A new AR pop-up appeared: **Physical attack power 300 percent UP**.

Whoa, whoa, whoa. How much buffing up do you need to do?

If I just stood by and watched, this situation was only going to get worse; it was time for action.

I wouldn't be able to take out his legs with my sword, so I aimed and fired with the Magic Gun at maximum power.

The demon twisted out of the way of what should have been a nearly invisible bullet, and he came at me with a speed I wouldn't have expected from such a huge brute.

Leaving a trail of red light in his wake, the demon slashed his poisonous claws down at me. I leaned back and dodged the strike, using my absurd strength to swing my sword upward. But the attack barely scratched the hell demon's skin. I had thought I'd be used to combat by now with all the monster extermination we'd done, but I apparently still had a ways to go.

"What's Wrong, Hero? Aren't You Any Good With Your Holy Sword? The Great I, Disappointed."

The tiny scratch I'd made on him healed in the blink of an eye.

I guess the Oracle was right—without the Hero title, I can't use the Holy Sword to its full strength.

I continued evading his attacks and launching counterattacks of my own, but the demon dodged my magic bullets, and my sword would barely scratch him, so I wasn't dealing much damage.

And then, apparently tired of my efforts, he launched a thunderbolt attack at me. I didn't have a chance to dodge it, so the lightning struck me dead-on.

> Skill Acquired: "Lightning Magic: Demon"

> Skill Acquired: "Lightning Resistance"

> Skill Acquired: "Paralysis Resistance"

"Ow, my hands and feet are tingling."

If I had to compare it to anything, I'd say it was like a more extreme form of the pins and needles in your limbs after you kneel for a long time. Checking my HP gauge, I saw I'd taken about five points of damage.

I tried to dodge the demon's claws as they swiped toward me, but my limbs were still a little numb, so I was a second too late. I blocked with my sword, but it still managed to graze my shoulder.

> Skill Acquired: "Poison Resistance"

> Skill Acquired: “Disease Resistance”

> Skill Acquired: “Decay Resistance”

How many status conditions can you inflict with one attack?! Luckily, I seemed to have resisted them all, because nothing strange happened to my body.

Putting some distance between the demon and myself, I funneled points into my new skills.

“You’re Sturdy For A Human! The Great I, Impressed.”

But apparently, surviving all those attacks and conditions had left me a little overconfident.

The demon breathed a puff of gray air that crept up my left side.

The surface of my body started to crust over. I yanked a cloak out of Storage to ward off the rest of the petrification breath.

> Skill Acquired: “Petrification Resistance”

I freaked out a bit, but it looked like all that had hardened were my clothes and the surface of my body; when I flexed my fingers a few times, the plaster-like material flaked away, revealing perfectly smooth skin underneath.

Man, I’m lucky my level is so much higher than that thing’s.

The demon seemed startled that his Petrifying Breath hadn’t worked on me, but he diverted my attention with dark missiles and wind blades, then came at me with his claws while I was dodging in midair.

Crap, I forgot—it’s a bad move in fighting games to evade in the air, isn’t it?

The petrified part of my robe was brittle, and it tore off, exposing my shoulder.

I took damage from the attack, but my “Self-Healing” skill closed up the wound as soon as it was inflicted, so while my robe got a little bloodied up, my HP gauge was just fine.

Still, it probably wasn’t safe to lose too much blood, so I’d better be careful not to rely too much on “Self-Healing.”

The demon recklessly reached out to grab me, and I took this one-in-a-million chance to lop the arm right off.

Huh? I thought his physical damage was reduced by 90 percent?

But no sooner did the arm hit the ground than the hell demon grew a new one in its place. The severed limb morphed like a ball of clay, forming into a lesser hell demon.

“That’s A Sharp Sword You Have There, But The More You Cut Me Up, The More Demon Spawn I’ll Create. The Great I, Cautioning.”

The arm demon rushed to attack the captain and his soldiers. Luckily, he didn’t have any magic skills, so they should be able to handle him. Just to make their job a little easier, I used my Magic Gun to shoot his legs.

“No Matter How Good You Are With That Sword, You Won’t Be Able To Beat Me If You Can’t Use Its Full Power. The Great I, Derisive.”

So it’s like the Oracle said: “Only the Holy Sword of a hero can defeat a demon lord.” Damn, does the same rule apply to greater hell demons?

But I have just two kinds of magic spells.

Zena had said weaker magic wouldn’t work on greater hell demons, so Fire Shot was no good.

And using Meteor Shower here was out of the question. It could probably beat this guy, but Zena and the beastfolk girls could get caught in it, too. Even the people of Seiryuu City and I probably wouldn’t get out unscathed.

While I was distracted thinking about this, I dodged the demon’s claws only to get hit squarely by his tail, sending me flying across the ground and into the opposite wall.

The impact made me dizzy, and I shook my head quickly before standing back up.

Things were only going to get worse if I didn’t do something soon.

My Holy Sword could cut the demon, but not only would he heal, he’d produce more enemies.

The only two spells I had were either too weak or too strong.

And he could dodge the Magic Gun.

Hmm? Or can he?

“The Great I, Attacking.”

The hell demon came at me with a dropkick. Several tons of weight crushed down on me, and pieces of the floor scattered everywhere as I was slammed back against the wall.

Man, if I didn’t have “Pain Resistance,” that definitely would’ve made me faint.

“… ■■■ ***Air Hammer*** *Kitsui!”*

“… ■■■■ ***Flame Spear*** *Honoo no Yari!”*

“… ■■ ***Sacred Javelin*** *Seinaru Yari!”*

Just then, Zena, Viscount Belton, and the Oracle all struck the hell demon with their magic.

He resisted most of the magic, so he didn’t take much damage, but they’d created more than enough of a gap for me. I’d dropped the Magic Gun and the Holy Sword, but I still had a backup Magic Gun ready in my Storage.

“How Dare You Interrupt My Fun With Your Weak Magic? The Great I, Offended.”

Still pinning me down with one of his feet, the monster lifted a nearby boulder and prepared to throw it at Zena and the others.

Like I’m gonna let you do that.

I took the Magic Gun out of Storage and fired it point-blank. With the power on maximum, of course.

“Gunhghgh! The Great I, Careless.”

The first shot hit the demon, but he was quick to abandon the boulder and jump away, so he dodged my other attacks. *I hate the stupid one-second lag after I fire this thing.*

But the damage I’d inflicted was barely 1 percent of his HP. He seemed to recover from magic attacks slower than sword cuts, though, so maybe if I could hit him over and over…

I'll distract him with Fire Shot and then shoot him at point-blank range. My MP gauge seems to regenerate really fast, so as long as I don't use Meteor Shower or anything, I shouldn't have to worry about running out.

Hoping to make the Fire Shot at least a little more powerful, I put away the Holy Sword I'd just recovered and took out a staff instead. The viscount and Zena used them, so it must have some effect on the strength of magic.

"Given Up On The Holy Sword You Couldn't Use, Have You? The Great I, Observant."

The demon was half crouching some distance away, ready to dodge in any direction.

I selected Fire Shot from my magic menu.

Eat this!

BOOM!!

White light blinded my view, and a thunderous roar echoed so loudly, my ears seemed to fail me for a moment.

When my vision returned, I saw the half-charred and smoking hell demon, plus a huge hole in the labyrinth wall behind him. The surface was still bright red, bubbling like lava.

What was THAT?

…Oh yeah, now I remember.

When I'd used Meteor Shower from the magic menu instead of the icon, it was dozens of times more powerful. I guess it would be the same way with other spells, too.

A gust of hot steam blew toward me. It seemed like it'd burn my throat if I inhaled it, so I held my breath.

"How Could One So Skilled In Combat Also Be A Sorcerer? The Great I, Uncomprehending."

From behind a rock somewhere, I heard the viscount exclaiming. "That could only have been the greater spell Crimson Javelin!"

Nope, sorry, it was just a super-basic Fire Shot.

But if it was going to be this powerful, that might actually make it harder to use. I could definitely beat this guy with three more hits like that, but he seemed to have realized that, too, because he was moving to hide behind Zena and the others so I couldn't attack.

Sorry, Mr. Eyesore.

But you're already in checkmate.

I put away the staff and switched back to the Holy Sword.

Because when I remembered the thing about the magic menu, I also remembered something else.

I launched myself forward, kicking rocks aside as I charged toward the demon.

"Only the Holy Sword of a hero can defeat a demon lord."

I fended off the demon's desperate "Petrifying Breath" with a tent from Storage, then slid right under his legs.

Greater hell demons rule over lesser demons. They're the "right-hand man" of a demon lord—they're even "godlike."

The petrified tent served to shield me from sight.

From its shadow, I hit the ceiling with a Fire Shot, distracting everyone in the area.

But while I have Holy Swords, I don't have the Hero title.

Using the radar as my guide, I leaped off the ground, then kicked off the ceiling, altering my direction. My feet felt kind of hot.

So I can't deliver the killing blow.

Leaping around in a triangle, I slashed at the hell demon's wings, snatching away his ability to fly.

But is that really true?

I now had only seconds to win before he regenerated his wings.

Think about your titles. What do you have?

I changed my title and my sword, and as my foe paused to grow back his wings, I brought my weapon straight down on the crown of his head.

The blade, so dark it seemed to absorb all the light around it, cut right through the jet-black demon. Black dust spewed from his body as he began to crumble away.

“What Kind Of Sword Is That?! The Great…I…Defeated…”

As soon as the demon finished speaking, the dust turned to a faint gray haze and disappeared.

The lack of resistance unnerved me a little bit, as if I’d killed only an illusion, but when I checked my log, it showed that I really had defeated him.

While everyone around me was stunned, I quickly put the sword back in its scabbard and took my leave.

Now that I thought about it, the method I had used to defeat him was simple.

If the title Hero and a Holy Sword could kill a demigod-like demon, then surely the Godkiller title and a Divine Blade could kill a god, too.

Something like that, anyway.

I returned to the small room where I’d made my transformation before, changed back into my old clothes, and climbed back up the pit. The dungeon walls were made of tougher stuff than normal rock, so it was a little more difficult to make footholds with my fingers.

“Master!”

When I was about fifteen feet away from the top, Tama came down toward me, tied to a lifeline. She must have been on her way to rescue me. I could see Liza and Pochi peering down from the hole above.

“Thanks for coming to get me.”

“Yeah!”

I put Tama on my shoulders and climbed the rest of the way.

“Pochi, Liza, thank you, too.”

“I’m so glad…”

“You’re all right, sir!”

Liza was so overwhelmed with emotion that she looked about to cry, so I handed her a fresh handkerchief from my bag. Pochi and Tama immediately grabbed on to me and cried, possibly wanting handkerchiefs of their own.

All right, all right. As long as they’re just tears of relief, you can cry as much as you like.

Zena raced toward me, and I waved at her. It hadn’t even been two days since we got trapped in the labyrinth, but it felt like we’d been in there much longer.

At some point, I had gotten a few new titles.

> Title Acquired: Labyrinth Conqueror

> Title Acquired: Dances with Demons

> Title Acquired: Demon Slayer [Greater]

> Title Acquired: Hero

…I wouldn’t have minded getting that last one a little earlier, you know.

Back to the Surface

Satou here. One time, due to a combination of human error and good fortune, I ended up staying in a high-class suite in a fancy hotel. I'm just a lowly middle-class commoner, so I was too nervous to enjoy it fully in the end. I guess you can have too much of a good thing.

With Pochi and Tama each hanging on to one of my hands, I headed up the spiral staircase to the exit. I was the very last one of the civilians to exit. The battle-crazy warrior and a few of his subordinates were still below, standing guard at the door.

I thought there might be a bag check when we got to the surface, so I switched out my Garage Bag with the normal standin while nobody was looking. I also took about two-thirds of the cores that Pochi was carrying, putting the rest in Storage by way of the Garage Bag.

The real number of cores was way more than other people had, so I figured this was best in order to avoid any trouble.

"Once we get outside, we should find something good to eat. Is there any food you want in particular?"

"Meeeat?"

"Meat, please, sir! We saw some huuuge meat on a carriage earlier, sir!"

These kids really love meat, huh?

I had assumed it was because they were beastfolk, but I guess most kids do like it.

But the "huge meat" Pochi was talking about was probably wyvern, wasn't it? If possible, I'd rather avoid that, so I did my best to guide her toward some other kind.

"Pochi, Tama. Meat certainly is a wonderful thing. But for slaves to demand it

like that is reaching far beyond our means."

"Our…means?"

"Liza uses hard words, sir."

"Meat is a luxury."

Liza had stepped in to rebuke them for me, but as long as we went to street stalls, I didn't think it would be that expensive. Even the wild boar steak I had before was only a few coppers.

"Well, we *should* celebrate getting out of the labyrinth alive. Why don't we get some meat?"

"Yaaay!"

"Thanks, sir!"

"If that is your will, master. I'll be sure to savor every last bite!"

Still holding hands with me, Pochi and Tama jumped around for joy. When I looked back at Liza, she was wearing a grave expression and clenching her fist as if making a solemn vow.

You know you don't have to get that serious about it, right?

The sunlight was blinding when we walked out of the labyrinth's exit.

Pochi and Tama dragged me forward, bounding into the light of the outside world.

When we emerged, we were met by the anxious faces and loud clamoring of the people who'd come out before us.

Looking around, the reason became fairly evident.

The exit led into an empty lot about the size of a school yard. Rather than being perfectly level, the ground formed a spiral that centered on the dungeon's mouth. Most likely, this was a remnant of the creation of the labyrinth, when it had sucked in the plaza and the buildings around it.

Surrounding the exit, as if to wall it in, was a makeshift fence supported by sandbags, with cannons like the sort I'd seen in the anti-dragon defense tower. Behind these cannons, archers stood with large crossbows at the ready.

Of course, all the weapons were all pointed at the opening—in other words, the very place we were standing.

Pochi, Tama, and even Liza looked nervous, so I asked somebody who looked like they had a better grasp on the situation.

“Well, they’re telling us we have to stay here until they figure out if any of us are monsters disguised as humans, or infected with a disease from demons, or anything like that.”

I see… So we have to be quarantined.

According to the checks I’d done earlier, there were no monsters in the group and nobody affected by disease or poison of any kind. Of course, I wasn’t about to announce that to anyone, but even if I did, it wasn’t as though anyone would believe me anyway.

I checked the soldiers around the barricade, but none of them had any judgment-based skills, so we would just have to wait until a person or machine that could determine these things arrived.

Luckily, we had the Oracle and her priestesses among us, so there was no cause for concern about anyone dying of their injuries. Those with minor wounds were left to their own devices for now, but people with broken bones or serious gashes had been healed with magic and were resting on cloaks spread out on the ground.

Oh, right—I still have three potions and one unused salve, so I should offer them to the wounded. I’ll just buy more souvenirs for Martha and the others later. They probably wouldn’t want to use medicine from a stranger, so I asked Zena to use them instead to heal the others.

The beastfolk kids must have been bored to tears with waiting, because Tama had sprawled out asleep on my lap while Pochi climbed on my shoulders.

I didn’t want them to draw the ire of the other survivors by making too much noise, so I let them lean against me and rest. Liza was still holding her spear and seemed to be standing on guard, so I had her sit across from me and take a break, too.

After we’d waited for an hour or so, some carriages arrived, and the

quarantine operation began. Apparently, they'd be calling people over one at a time and checking them using a Yamato stone.

The captain and the Oracle priestess were called first, then the magic soldier Zena. It seemed like they'd be checking on military personnel first, so we'd be toward the end.

"Okay, I'm going next, but I'll wait for you on the other side."

"'kay!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Understood."

The three of them looked nervous as I proceeded to the carriages. I left my bag with the civil-official lady and proceeded to the Yamato stone.

It would probably look weird for me to still be level 1 with no skills after escaping from a dungeon, right?

I opened the networking tab on my menu. The girls were level 13 now, so I figured level 10 would be about right. I picked a few skills that a trader would have: "Haggling" and "Estimation." *Is it weird if I don't have any combat skills?* I added "Throwing" and "Evasion," just to be safe.

Following the official's instructions, I placed my hands over the Yamato stone. My gaze was tempted toward the cleavage of the female official across from me, but I forcefully resisted. Instead I read the information displayed by the stone, making sure that it had updated with my changes.

"My goodness. For someone who's not a soldier or an explorer to be at this level at such a young age, you must have gone through a lot of hardships."

"Oh, it's nothing so remarkable as that."

The female knight in heavy makeup standing over the stone was impressed with my level, but I deflected it like a true Japanese person.

"I told you, hand over the spear!"

"My master made this for me—it's as precious to me as my life. I cannot part with it, not even for a moment!"

“I told you, your feelings have nothing to do with it!”

Hearing arguing voices behind me, I turned around to see that Liza was putting up a fight about parting with her spear.

“Liza, go ahead and give it to them. I’ll make sure they return it later.”

“I-if that is your will, master…”

At my words, Liza reluctantly gave up her spear to the civil official.

I made a note of the woman’s name and affiliation in the memo pad of my networking screen. It’d be great if we could get it back right away, but judging by my map, it looked like everyone was getting loaded into carriages and brought to the castle.

I doubted we’d be imprisoned or put to death to keep us quiet or anything, but we might be under house arrest until the situation was under control.

I’d imagine a dungeon appearing in the middle of the city and a greater demon showing up makes for a pretty unusual case.

I heard a small outcry behind me.

Apparently, they were surprised that Liza, a slave, was level 13 and even had four skills.

I couldn’t read her expression, so it was hard to tell what she was thinking, but her tail was twitching ever so slightly. *I think she might be a little proud of herself.*

Pochi and Tama meekly handed over the bag of cores and rushed toward me. It looked like they’d been allowed through as a pair, probably because they were kids.

Neither of them could reach the Yamato stone, so Liza had to lift them up. Pochi seemed to enjoy being held aloft, letting her arms and legs swing back and forth.

Pochi placed her hands on the Yamato stone, as instructed by the civil official. This elicited even louder shouting than Liza’s had. They must have been amazed that a ten-year-old child was level 13. Pochi had three skills, too.

Tama was last. Liza had to hold her up, like Pochi. Tama must have been looking forward to this part, because she eagerly played dead, letting her limbs dangle in the air.

The officials didn't raise as much of a fuss about Tama; her status was just as impressive, but seeing something surprising for the third time in the row tends to take the shock out of it. Tama looked a little disappointed.

"It must have been tough to raise demi-human slaves to be this strong, right?"

"No, not at all. They're very talented."

It was true that we'd gone through tough times, but the girls were talented, too. I probably wouldn't have died without them, but I definitely would've fallen into traps and suffered much more than I had.

A soldier guided the four of us onto a carriage. There were a few people aboard who had already gotten through inspection, too. There was a canopy over the cart, and armed guards stood at both exits.

We didn't know anybody aboard, so we rode in relative silence.

A few of our fellow passengers seemed to dislike beastfolk, too, so I warned Pochi and Tama to behave themselves. Fear brings out an aggressive side of people.

Finally, after a long ride in an oppressive atmosphere, we arrived at the count's castle. There was a cloth over both openings blocking our view, so I didn't even get to enjoy the scenery.

When we got out of the carriage, more soldiers surrounded us and began to escort us somewhere.

"Wh-where are you taking us?!"

"Yeah! We went through hell to get out of that labyrinth!"

A delinquent-looking boy and a middle-aged man with a scary face flared up at the soldiers. *They've got some guts to do that with so many armed guards surrounding us.*

"We're going to have you lot stay in the dungeon for a few days. Orders from the count himself. Those who refuse to cooperate will be found guilty of treason.

Now be quiet and follow orders! This is a matter of public security."

Whoa, I thought we would just get house arrest or something! I must have underestimated the power of the aristocracy. I guess now I'm going to experience firsthand being in jail.

I had *just* saved Seiryuu City from the clutches of a greater hell demon, and this was the thanks I got: a personal invitation to the dungeon. Bummer. But if I wanted to keep my identity a secret, I'd have to go along without complaining.

The threat of being charged with treason must have worked, because from that point on, everyone followed along with the soldiers in silence. I found out later that if you're convicted of treason, your family members are considered guilty as well.

The dungeon was dark and a little cold. The cells didn't even have beds, so it looked like we'd have to sleep directly on the stone floor. We were told that we'd each be given a single cloth blanket, so the nights would probably be freezing. To make matters worse, the only toilet was a pot with nothing screening it whatsoever.

I wish they'd worry a little more about privacy around here.

Overall, it seemed pretty miserable, but in the end, we didn't have to spend a single night there.

"Oi, which one of you is Satou?"

"That's me."

"Come with me. You're in a different area."

A prim civil official who seemed sorely out of place in the dungeon came to summon me.

Whoa, you want me to leave the girls in a place like this? Let's see what my "Negotiation" skill has to say about that.

"These three kids are my slaves. If I'm being moved elsewhere, I'd like to bring them as well, please."

"Hmm. I was ordered to come and get just you. I wasn't told anything about slaves."

Is this the part where I offer him a little something to sweeten the deal?

A gold coin would probably be too much, so I slipped a silver coin into the official's hand. "Is there anything we can do about that?"

> Skill Acquired: "Bribery"

> Skill Acquired: "Persuasion"

The silver seemed effective: The man's attitude abruptly shifted.

"…But I wasn't told *not* to bring them, either. Very well, they can come along for now. Don't blame me if they're turned away, though."

"That's fine with me."

I can probably just persuade the person who asked for me, too. My new skills looked like they'd help with that, so I assigned skill points to each of them. Although if I overused them, I got the feeling I'd raise an event flag to turn into a crooked trader.

The person we were guided to was an elderly man I'd never seen before.

"A pleasure to meet you, Sir Satou. I am Deschamps, the humble butler of the house of Belton."

…Aww, his name's not Sebastian? Or Jeeves?

"Nice to meet you, Sir Deschamps."

"Sir Satou, I implore you to simply call me Deschamps."

Calling such a fine-looking old gentleman by his name like that would be a pretty tough hurdle.

"I am so terribly sorry about the delay in our arrangements. Imagine forcing the savior of the viscount to stay in a dungeon! Please accept our humblest apologies."

"Not at all. I'm grateful enough to you that I won't have to spend a night down there. It's fairly difficult to see, anyway."

Apologizing profusely all the while, Mr. Deschamps led me to one of the guesthouses. *Man, this castle is huge. It's at least as big as my old college's campus.*

“Please avail yourself of this room. There should be a maid assigned here as well.”

Mr. Deschamps rang a bell on a table near the door, and woman in her late twenties appeared from an adjoining room.

Despite being a maid, she wasn’t wearing the kind of uniform you’d see in Akiba or classic Victorian England. Instead, she was wearing an ordinary dress befitting a lady-in-waiting.

So they don’t have aprons or lace headpieces here yet, huh? I’d think a Japanese person should introduce that before miso or soy sauce. Okay, maybe not, but still. How disappointing.

“I’ll be taking my leave here, by your pardon, but if there’s anything you need, please don’t hesitate to ask the attending maid. This is only a trifling little thing, but it’s a token of appreciation from our master.”

Mr. Deschamps handed me a small pouch. There wasn’t money inside but some small pebble-like objects. Probably precious stones. Although if it was candy, that’d be pretty funny.

It would be rude to refuse, so I accepted it while giving my thanks to be relayed to the viscount. I would’ve preferred to thank him in person, but since he was sending his butler to give me this, he must be too busy to meet me. I think a viscount is one step down from a count, after all.

Still, if memory served me correctly, a ranked noble living in a different noble’s territory seemed pretty unusual. I guess even if the titles were similar, I shouldn’t just carelessly assume the system was exactly the same as in medieval Europe.

Leaving the rest to the maid, Mr. Deschamps left.

“Please, allow me to show you to your room.”

“Yes, please do.”

I followed behind the maid, listening to her explanation.

Pochi and Tama were under strict orders from Liza to stay quiet; she was carrying them in her arms like stuffed animals. With both their hands pressed over their mouths, their pose was pretty adorable.

The butler and the maid had both referred to this as a “room,” but the entrance hall alone was at least 130 square feet; the whole guesthouse was probably about 7,000 square feet of floor space. If this was a hotel suite, a single night’s stay would probably cost several months’ salary.

The floor of the living room was carpeted with something like felt and contained several comfy-looking leather sofas. There were cloth-covered pillows on the furniture, too; it looked like the kind of place where I could really veg out.

This room was about five hundred square feet, with what looked like a chimneyless fireplace against the far wall. My interest must have shown on my face, because the maid supplied an explanation.

“This is a magic tool that utilizes fire stones. One need only touch this sheet copper and let magic flow into it, and the stones inside the hearth will produce heat. If you wish to adjust the temperature, simply ring the bell, and I will come right away, so please don’t hesitate to call me at any time.”

Ooh! How very fantasy-esque.

The chandelier on the ceiling didn’t seem to have any candles, either, so it must be another magic tool. An AR pop-up identified it as a **Light Shower Chandelier**. *I’m looking forward to nighttime, then.*

Next we were guided to a 350-square-foot parlor.

The furniture here was just as high-class as in the previous room, but maybe because these objects had sharper angles, they seemed more formal.

Next was a dining room with a huge table that could probably seat a lot of people. It was made of a dark stone, possibly granite, which was smooth to the touch.

She didn’t show them to us, but the maid briefly mentioned there was also a linen room, the maid’s waiting room, and a kitchenette attached to the parlor.

Up the stairs by the entrance was the main bedroom, which was just as large as the living room. I practically heard trumpet fanfare as I laid eyes on the canopied king-size bed in the center. It looked like the softest thing ever.

Pochi and Tama immediately moved to leap onto it, but fortunately, Liza had a

firm hold on both of them, so the maid was unperturbed. *Nice one, Liza.*

Apparently, the small room attached to this one was for servants and guards. It was really plain, with a hard-looking bed and a simple wooden chair. *What an extreme contrast.*

There were restrooms on each floor, but they were pit toilets like the one at the Gatefront Inn. The toilet-paper substitute was straw paper instead of a straw bundle, so I guess that was an improvement.

Unfortunately, it didn't look like there was a bath.

"Is something the matter?"

"No, I was just thinking that I haven't seen a bath anywhere…," I said with the faintest hope that I might be corrected.

"Ah, would you like to bathe? In that case, we can have the manservants bring up a tub. I'll have everything arranged by this evening."

Bring up a bathtub?! Those manservants must be ripped.

"I'm sorry to ask for something so difficult."

"Not at all! If you have any other requests, don't hesitate to ask."

I didn't really have anything, but I heard a small growl from someone's stomach behind me. I wasn't sure whether it was Pochi or Tama, but it was probably about time to eat.

"Well then, I will go and make preparations for lunch. Is there any food that I ought to avoid? I'm happy to accommodate your tastes."

"No, don't worry. I'm not too picky."

The maid bowed and left the room.

Pochi and Tama had fallen asleep in Liza's arms. *So…it was Liza's stomach that growled before?* Her face was a little red, so I pretended not to have noticed anything.

When I saw the food lined up on the table, I tilted my head in puzzlement.

There were seven plates of various sizes, all under silver lids to keep them from cooling. But why was there only enough for one person? Was this another

instance of discrimination against demi-humans?

“Excuse me, but isn’t there any food for these children?”

“The food for your servants has been prepared in a separate room.”

“Would it be possible to have their portion brought here as well? Eating meals together is one of my house’s customs.”

What I couldn’t say, of course, was that I didn’t want to eat all by myself.

Fast food was one thing, but a feast like this should be a lively affair with as many people as possible, I think.

The beastfolk girls were given tureens of stew with rye bread. At my request, the maid brought us extra plates so that I could share my food with the other three.

“Mm! Food in a castle is just as delicious as I’d expect.”

“Yummy, yummy!”

“The meat in the stew is so big and tasty, sir!”

“Indeed… It truly melts in the mouth, doesn’t it?”

Uh…there’s no meat like that on my plate. Unlike my dishes, their stew had some kind of blackish chunks.

Checking the AR screen, I saw that the meat on my plate was lamb, while theirs was wyvern. *So this is what Pochi was talking about when we left the labyrinth. The three of them seem to be enjoying it, so I won’t make a fuss.*

After thanking the maid for a delicious meal, I politely requested that all four of us be given the same food for dinner, even if it meant lowering the overall quality of the spread.

It’d be a pain to split it all up from my plates every time, after all.

My long-awaited bath came in the form of a marble bathtub big enough for one person, carried in by four manservants.

On top of that, several more manservants, or maybe slaves, carried in water that had been heated elsewhere, each making multiple round-trips to deliver it. *This is a pretty big process.* I’d been sure that they’d just have someone use

Everyday Magic to fill it up in a flash.

After more than an hour of preparation, the bath was finally ready.

I felt kind of bad for the people who'd had to go to all the trouble to set this up, but there was no use in holding back now. *I'll tip them later.*

"Do you two want to take a bath, too?"

"Yeah!"

"Yes, sir!"

Pochi and Tama were staring at the tub with great interest, so I invited them to join me. *They're only elementary-school age, so I don't think it's a problem if I let them take a bath with me.*

Apparently, they did have some short robes for bathing, but it didn't make sense to soak with clothes on.

"First, before we sit in the bath, we have to clean ourselves off."

I taught the kids how to use soap, which they responded to enthusiastically.

"Waaah! It's making white bubbly stuff!"

"It's slippery, sir!"

"But it seems to be removing the dirt effectively… Is something wrong, master?"

At some point, Liza had naturally joined in with Pochi and Tama. Her key areas were well hidden with soapsuds, but it still felt a little weird, since she was around high school age. Her chest was just as flat as the kids', but I still couldn't help noting the curve of her back.

"The water's hot, sir!"

"It's…weird? But it feels good!"

"How strange to use water to wash one's body! It's terribly luxurious, but it feels wonderful."

Before we had even gotten into the tub, bath time was already a big hit. Liza looked particularly happy.

Possibly because of all the years they'd spent as slaves, it took a while to get all the grime off them. As a result, the bathwater had cooled. I asked the maid if she could bring more warm water.

"… ■■■ ■ ■■■■ ***Heat*** *Kanetsu!"*

After the maid brought some water to fill the tub again, she used Everyday Magic to heat it up for us.

So heating up a bath is cause for magic, but…?

Well, I guess it was probably more efficient than replacing all the water…

Wait, that's not what's important here.

What I really want to know is, why does she need to wear that *to do magic?* She wasn't completely naked, but in the tiny robe she was wearing, she was at least halfway there. She had a great figure, and if that robe got wet, things would definitely show through that probably shouldn't. Things could get steamy here in more ways than one.

Thanking her for warming the bath, I asked her about her outfit in the most roundabout way possible.

"Ah, yes. In order to be prepared to meet your needs at any moment, I have been waiting on standby in this."

Ah…I see.

With no small reluctance, I politely declined her services.

Yeesh, that was close. If the beastfolk kids hadn't been here, I might've gone down a road that would earn this game an adults-only rating.

The tub wasn't big enough for all of us to use at once, so we went in to bathe and warm up one at a time.

Liza seemed to have taken a liking to the bath, because she meekly asked if she could soak in it again for a while longer, so I took Pochi and Tama to dry off first.

I wiped each of them dry with a soft towel. Now in her dress again, the maid offered to wipe me down, too, but again I politely refused.

I didn't know how comfortable I was with that kind of service.

That evening, our dinner included such extravagant dishes as a huge roasted bird. It looked similar to a roast chicken to me, but apparently, it was a bird called a Shiga wiretail.

Cutting the whole roast seemed like it'd be pretty difficult, so instead of putting on airs and insisting on doing it myself, I asked the maid for help; she cut it with truly impressive skill.

The beastfolk kids were especially fond of the parts that were on a bone.

Belatedly, I felt a wave of gratitude toward the viscount. This kind of treatment was worlds away from what we would've faced in the dungeon.

Come to think of it, I wonder if Nidoren and his friends are down there? I couldn't really get them out, but maybe I could see to it that they had a better time of it, at least?

I asked the maid about it after dinner; she said they should be able to get them better food and blankets, but she didn't have the authority to send down things like furniture. That would require a budget from the viscount.

Is it just a matter of money? Because I can get that out of Storage.

"How much do you think they would need?"

"For just one person, one silver coin would be fine. However, since it's apparently at least ten people, we would need two gold coins."

What, is that all? I took the money out of my pocket and gave it to the maid, requesting that she see that the conditions were improved for the people in the dungeon.

"Yaaay!"

"It's so fluffy, sir!"

Pochi and Tama jumped around on the bed.

I guess all kids see is a trampoline when they look at a bed this big.

Liza, too, sat down on the edge, enjoying its bounciness in her reserved way.

Each of us was supposed to sleep in our own beds, but Pochi and Tama turned their puppy-dog eyes on me, and before I knew it, I was agreeing to let them

sleep in mine with me.

And, well, it seemed mean to make Liza sleep all by herself in the other room.

I practically sank into the mattress as I lay down. I had been awake the whole time we were in the labyrinth, in order to secure the kids' safety. Sure, I'm used to pulling all-nighters anyway, but my high stamina also ensured that I felt fine even without sleep.

Still, exhaustion had been gradually piling up on me all this time, and I finally yielded to it in the soft bed, letting my mind relax.

With Pochi and Tama as warm as hot-water bottles by my side, I drifted off to a long-awaited quiet sleep.

Life under house arrest was surprisingly enriching.

I was often reading the introductory books on magic and alchemy that I'd found in the labyrinth, so the time passed in the blink of an eye.

I tried practicing some spells in my free time, too, but I couldn't pull off those stupidly hard chants even once.

The beastfolk kids were really fidgety, clearly not accustomed to having time on their hands, so I had them let off steam by practicing their sword techniques and grappling in the courtyard.

I was running out of books, so I asked the maid to go out and buy more for me. It would look suspicious if I threw around too much money, so instead I gave her some of the stones I'd received from the viscount.

I also asked her to pick up some picture books for Pochi and Tama, but they couldn't read, so I ended up reading out loud to them.

It kind of felt like I had kids of my own.

Although I was under house arrest, it wasn't as though I didn't get to see anyone. On two occasions, someone who seemed to be a civil official visited me.

The first time, she'd come to question me about what happened in the labyrinth and return my confiscated belongings.

During this visit, I was surprised to hear that "anything found in a dungeon

belongs to the person who found it.” *So if you killed someone in a dungeon and took their stuff, it would legally be yours?* Hung up on this problem, I asked the official about it.

“Don’t worry about that. It would show up in the perpetrator’s ‘bounty’ information on the Yamato stone. In Labyrinth City, there are people gifted with the Eye of Judgment stationed at all dungeon exits to search for criminals. There are guards with the gift at each gate in Seiryuu City as well.”

Sounds like a convenient gift—which was a hereditary skill, by the way. But apparently, this one was found only in the family lines of devout followers of Urion. It appeared in one out of a few hundred people of the Urion faith, so each city had only a few individuals with it.

I wonder what gifts followers of other gods are granted?

It definitely seemed like all gods’ names end in *-ion*—except for the dragon god Aconcagua. *Is there some reason why that’s the only name that doesn’t follow the rule?*

My thoughts had wandered a little, but the civil official’s talk had only just begun.

Apparently, the count’s government was compulsorily purchasing the cores that had been confiscated with my belongings, so I was given a small bag of money in place of their return. This was apparently a standard law for any monster hunted throughout the county, so inside a dungeon was no exception, she informed me.

Well, the amount of money I was given matches the market price of the cores, so I have no complaints.

Judging by the civil official’s tone, it seemed like cores were a resource that was usually in short supply. *I’ll have to be careful when I off-load the rest of them that are in Storage right now.*

“We can’t ascertain the safety of this monster meat, so I’m afraid we can’t return it. This spear seems to be made from parts of a monster, too, so we can’t allow it to be taken into the city.”

Liza’s head whipped around at an alarming speed.

Wh-whoa! Is she actually mad?

Liza, stop. That expression is terrifying. See, even the civil official's smile is cracking.

It made sense to me that the meat might be a problem in terms of disease control, but Liza seemed pretty attached to her weapon, so I tried to negotiate.

"That spear is actually quite strong, so is there any way I could ask you to have someone with a "Judgment" skill look at it to determine whether there's any danger? I'll take on any fees for the assessment, of course, so I'm hoping that you can return it if it's determined to be safe…?"

"V-very well. I'll make the arrangements. If it's judged as safe, it'll be returned to you with the rest of your weapons when you exit the castle."

"Thank you very much."

Oh, right—I should ask about the beastfolk girls.

"Um, I have another question…"

I asked her about the ownership rights of the girls.

"I see. So you found these slaves in the labyrinth after their owner passed away, took them in, and brought them out along with you?"

"Yes, that's right."

Liza nodded, too. Pochi and Tama were hanging on her legs, dozing off. *Are we boring you?*

"In that case, they now belong to you."

"Really?"

I mean, I was planning to buy them and set them free, anyway, but still…

"Unless they killed their master themselves, any slaves whose master dies in a dungeon are the same as objects found there. So both legally and customarily speaking, you are now their master."

She wrote something on an official-looking piece of paper and handed it over.

"This is a temporary certificate to officially declare your ownership. It'll work

only inside the city, so you should go to the town hall or a slavery firm to get the official contract drawn up."

I asked whether we could take care of it in the castle somehow, but it wasn't within her jurisdiction, so it wouldn't be possible. I guess bureaucracy was complicated even in a parallel world.

During this visit, I also gave her the names, locks of hair, and belongings of the deceased from the labyrinth, so her second visit was to inform me of the results.

A sign had been posted on the wall beside the temporary station by the dungeon exit listing the names of the deceased, so they had been able to deliver the locks of hair to the bereaved families. The families had wanted to buy back some of the other belongings, so she gave me the money they'd offered. Apparently, this was taxed, too.

I told the civil official that I didn't need any money, but she told me, "Please accept it. If there's no fee, people will show up claiming to be relatives of the deceased."

I see. It's a pretty tough world out there.

If accepting the reward pained me, she suggested that I could donate it to an orphanage or a temple.

Oh, that's a good idea. I'll have to ask Zena about where I should donate it.

On the fifth day of our house arrest, Zena came to visit me, along with Sister Ohna.

Sipping on the ludicrously named "blue-green tea" that the maid had prepared for us, we exchanged information.

"So, Zena, they released you two?"

"Yes. Since there's a shortage of magic users, we were released almost immediately. However, we've been working at the temporary garrison by the dungeon exit ever since."

"That sounds rough."

Apparently, they'd been put to work right after escaping from the maze. *I've never seen him, but this count seems pretty brutal.*

“Well, my role is just to communicate with the team that’s investigating the labyrinth, so it’s not too bad. The sorcerers have the biggest job—they’re working until their magic dries up, trying to build a magic barrier so the labyrinth doesn’t expand under the city.”

“It’s not only the sorcerers who are busy. We servants of God are also working to consecrate the stone monument at the shrine that’s been built there. I haven’t had any time to sleep in these past three days.”

Sister, if you’re that overworked, you should have stayed at the temple to rest instead of coming along with Zena to visit me.

“The encampment by the entrance has a temporary wall around it, and they’ve been quelling rumors in town by paying the minstrels to restrict what information they release, so I’d imagine we can have you free in a few more days.”

That’s good. It’s really comfortable here, but I’m getting a little bored of it.

Apparently, some minstrels served as a sort of public relations team. In games, they usually provided valuable support magic, so this new take was sort of refreshing.

Three days after Zena came to visit, we were set free.

“Sir Satou!”

As we headed toward the main gate of the castle, Nidoren and company, who had also been released, met us.

“The prison guard told us you sent the warm food and cushions for us. We are all so incredibly grateful to you!”

Hearing who I was from Nidoren, the other men around him all thanked me at once. As we walked toward the gate, the topic turned to how delicious the food in the dungeon had been, so I was relieved that their treatment really had been improved.

“Thanks so much. It was even better than the food in the west quarter!”

“I wholeheartedly agree. There was no alcohol with it, of course, but I was happy enough just to be given stew with meat in a dungeon!”

“Yeah, it was so good, I coulda stayed there a few more days!”

“Nobody’s gonna believe us when we tell them about it back in the west quarter.”

“No kiddin’!”

With that, the men laughed heartily. They seemed to have taken imprisonment pretty well. I’d like to be as tough as them someday.

Nidoren said he’d take care of the paperwork for the girls’ ownership free of charge as thanks for my help, so we went to meet him in the slave market.

I had wanted to go along with him immediately, but the horse-drawn carriage he took refused to allow beastfolk on board, so we had to go on foot.

Apparently, demi-humans were treated a little better in the duchy to the south or Labyrinth City in the southwest, so maybe we should move there.

“Hey, you! With the dog ears!”

Ugh, don’t they have anything better to do? I turned around irritably to find the blond young man we’d rescued from the spider in the labyrinth.

Come to think of it, he looked like he wanted to say something when we were talking with Nidoren, too.

“Can I help you?”

“No, not you. I got something to say to the kid.”

He still wanted to insult her even after she’d saved his life? What a terrible ingrate.

I started glaring at him without thinking, but he wasn’t looking at me. Instead, I accidentally locked eyes with a well-built ruffian behind him, who panicked and ran off into an alley.

What was that about? You have the “Intimidation” skill, too, you know… I don’t get it.

While the other guy distracted me, the young man told Pochi what he’d wanted to say.

“Thanks for saving me. I’m sorry I kicked you.”

He said it in a low voice as he walked away, but all four of us heard it clearly.

I doubt he'd changed his anti-beastfolk ways entirely, but if we had improved his attitude even a little, that was still pretty good.

Pochi looked up at me triumphantly, and I ruffled her hair enthusiastically. Her tail looked like it was going to break off if it wagged any harder.

Tama ran over and clung to me, too, of course, so I patted her head as well. Liza stood nearby, looking down at them and nodding with a fond smile. *What are you, their mom?*

Later, at Nidoren's place, I signed the contract to officially become the girls' master.

I wanted to set them free right away, but the slave trader entreated me to take a look at a few slaves who hadn't sold at the auction, so I followed him dutifully.

I know I technically just took on the girls, but I'm planning to set them free right away, so I'm not looking to buy any more. I'd rather just hire a sightseeing guide.

Since the girls he wanted to show me were left over from the auction, it was no surprise that they all had certain quirks.

I paid little attention to his explanation, until finally we were down to the last two he wanted to show me.

When I saw them, I quickly revised my opinion of Nidoren's salesmanship skills. *I see… So he showed me all those others with strange quirks so that these two would look better by comparison?!*

The first was the Japanese-looking little girl I'd seen in a carriage on Center Street. She was only fourteen, though she was adorable with a very lovely face. Her long black hair shone with such purity that she could easily make a living in shampoo commercials. If she weren't so young, I probably would've been tempted.

"M-my name is Lulu." She introduced herself in a half whisper. Apparently the shy type, she immediately lowered her head after speaking, hiding her beautiful face in her hair.

Nidoren followed up with more information, but I could scarcely believe my ears.

“She might be difficult to look at, but she does possess the ‘Etiquette’ skill!”

You’re saying she’s ugly?

If this girl isn’t good-looking, then neither is 99 percent of all women, you know!

I thought maybe “difficult to look at” was some roundabout expression for complimenting a girl’s beauty, but as he went on, it seemed like that wasn’t the case.

Are the standards of beauty just different here?

With Nidoren’s permission, I lightly touched her hair and her cheek. No, I wasn’t giving in to her charms and changing my class to “child molester.” There was just something that I wanted to confirm.

I whispered a few words in her ear, but she just looked perplexed, as if she’d never heard them before.

I had thought that maybe she was a Japanese person, but I guess I was wrong.

The next and final slave Nidoren introduced me to was the lilac-haired girl who I’d seen with Lulu before—Arisa.

She was eleven years old, a beautiful little girl with flowing locks and Northern European features.

While she wasn’t quite on the same level as Lulu, it was still surprising that she hadn’t been sold, until I remembered her sinister titles.

Arisa’s round, wide eyes looked at me pleadingly.

Okay, please stop staring like that.

“I’m terribly sorry, Sir Satou. She’s normally so clever that even her ill-omened purple hair would seem like a trifling matter, but she appears to have been captivated by your charms…”

With this strange comment, Nidoren urged the girl to speak.

Uh, no. That's definitely not the case, buddy. I couldn't help but smile wryly.

Still, I was surprised it was her hair color and not her titles that had prevented her from being sold. Purple hair certainly was unusual, but I'd never heard of it being a bad omen.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you…Sir *Satou*.”

There was something strange about the way her childish voice had pronounced my name.

“My name is Arisa. I became a slave after losing my kingdom, but I could give you any information about this world that you’d like to hear. I’m most certain I would be of great use to you in *various* ways.”

Her brisk manner of speaking was highly unsuited to her extremely youthful voice. I was probably imagining it, but it seemed uncannily similar to a student interviewing for a job.

As her title implied, she was a former princess, which might explain why she could smile so elegantly while upselling herself so vigorously.

However, I did feel like there was some uncomfortable hidden meaning behind that last phrase. *You don’t really think I’d ask a child for sexual favors, do you?*

Purple hair aside, the phrase *this world* and the name *Arisa* definitely intrigued me.

Again, I got permission from Nidoren to lean in and attempt the same experiment I’d tried with Lulu.

“AAAAH! I hate spiders! Get it off! Ew! This is the worst!”

Her unruffled princess-like demeanor vanished immediately, and she reacted the way any normal girl would.

After all, I’d whispered, “There’s a spider in your hair” into her ear…*in Japanese*.

I don’t know what kanji Arisa *is written with, but this girl is definitely like me.*

Lulu and Arisa.

From the moment I saw them being jostled along in that horse-drawn carriage, I think I might have been fated to become their “master.”

Afterword

Thank you very much for picking up this book!

And to those of you who went so far as to purchase it, my sincerest gratitude!

Nice to meet you. I'm Hiro Ainana.

Even for those of you who read the web version of this novel, this is the first time I've introduced myself on paper, so I think this greeting still feels appropriate.

This work, *Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody*, began on March 3, 2013, on the novel submission site *Shousetsukan ni Narou* ("Become a Novelist") and continued updating daily for more than half a year, then switched over to its current weekly pace.

I was fortunate enough to receive the support of many readers, who encouraged me strongly with their comments as I continued the serialization; thanks to them, my story caught the attention of Fujimi Shobo, who approached me with the unexpected proposal of making it into a book, and thus, this book was born.

When it came to adapting the web novel into a book, I was careful of three things.

Firstly, I wanted to make this a book that would satisfy readers of the web version.

It's because of the web version's readers that this book could be published. It would be terrible if they bought the book versions just to let them pile up.

Thus, rather than simply revising the web-novel version, I added more scenes that would be especially enjoyable for readers of the original. Of course, it wouldn't make sense if the book only appealed to those who've already read it, so for new readers these scenes will simply serve as foreshadowing.

I’m sure readers of the web version will end up wanting to scold both the protagonist and writer.

So please, be sure to read the books instead of just piling them up somewhere.

The second goal was to make sure that new readers would enjoy the book version without having to read the web version.

This is obvious, but it wouldn’t make sense if you needed information from the web version to read the first volume. So I added explanations for tropes from Become a Novelist that new readers wouldn’t understand and slimmed down other parts by cutting unnecessarily long exposition and overly verbose scenes.

My third goal was to make a book that people would want to reread after finishing it.

For those of you who enjoyed reading it the first time, please read it again sometime. I’m sure you’ll find lots of little pieces of foreshadowing that you might have missed the first time around.

With these three things in mind, I worked hard on revising the web-novel version, fixing passages poorly received and enhancing scenes that were popular. As a result, more than 70 percent of this book is new material. The other 30 percent has been revised, too, so I think readers of the web version would be hard-pressed to find a passage that’s completely unchanged.

There are also plenty of scenes that are entirely new, so I recommend those who aren’t sure about buying the book to give it a try.

I enjoyed working on this even through hard times, but the journey wasn’t always easy.

My plan had been to work on the book outside of the busy periods at my day job, but when my deadlines got extended at work, it ended up totally overlapping with the time I needed to do the finishing touches on this book.

I’m used to death marches at my day job, but this sort of crunch time was a little different than usual, so I may or may not have gotten close to being beckoned into a parallel world myself.

But this won’t be any fun if I just continue talking about the hard times, so I’ll

leave it at that.

Finally, I want to thank my supervisor, Mr. H; Fujimi Shobo; shri, for drawing such wonderful illustrations; and everyone involved with the printing, binding, distribution, and so on!

And to those readers who have read all the way to the end: thank you so much!

Let’s meet again in the next volume.

Hiro Ainana

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